

CONNIE WILLIS: ORDINARY HEROES BLACKOUT AND ALL CLEAR

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY • #227 • MARCH-APRIL • £3.95



interzone

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JON INGOLD
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MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE ON NEW SF FILMS



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PRINTED IN THE UK

Publisher

TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham,
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Central Books (t: 020 8986 4854)
WWMD (t: 0121 7883112)

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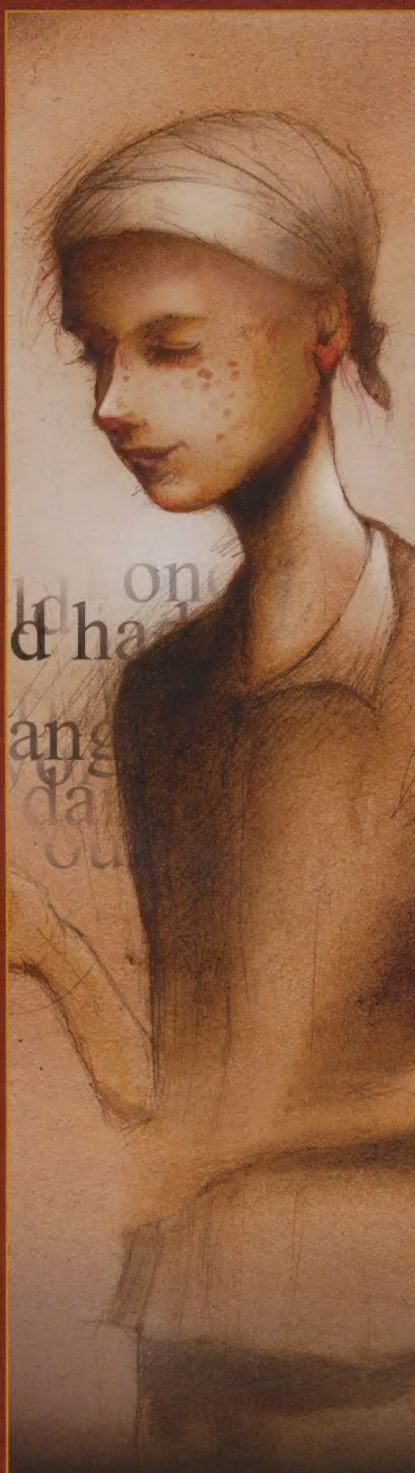
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EDITORIAL



Usually it takes me some time to build up a story, but on a couple of occasions a whole story has popped up into my mind pretty much all in one go. An early *Interzone* story, 'The Long

Story of Frozen Heart', was one such case. The whole thing came to me as I stood in a shop queue, listening to the melancholy muzak. ("And it shows," I do realise, is one possible response!)

I used to work as a social worker, and I still teach and write about social work. 'Johnny's New Job' came to me, also pretty much in one go, when the 'Baby P' case was at its height. *The Sun* was printing photos of the professional 'culprits' along with numbers you could phone in on and dish up the dirt. And I, along with fellow social workers across the land, was feeling just a tiny, tiny frisson of what it must have been like to be (say) a Tutsi during the Rwanda genocide, listening out for the mob.

Not so long previously social workers had come in for equally vitriolic attack for removing children from families *before* they were hurt. (Google the *Daily Mail* article 'Scandal of the Stolen Children' if you want to see for yourself.) What goes on when these things blow up, it seemed to me, was no longer in any sense a rational process of appropriately attributing blame, but a primitive ritual. Horror must be purged by sacrifice, guilt assuaged with blood.

Science fiction, as ever, offered a perfect set of tools for exploring these thoughts. I can't imagine any other medium that would allow me so quickly and easily to construct a world in which these rituals were manifest, and yet at the same time to place within it an ordinary human being – the hapless Johnny – who could live out its implications on our behalf.

Incidentally, nature imitated art here. When I had Johnny yell out that the welfare officer's children should be killed, I truly thought that no one in real life would really be *that* stupid. Later I heard that the director of children's services in Haringey had indeed received death threats against her kids.

— Chris Beckett

ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD

As Others See Us. 'At least beer geeks get to drink beer, which is a step up from most other forms of geekery. Plus, you don't have to wear pocket protectors or make Star Trek costumes, and sometimes you actually get to meet women.' (Nicholas Pashley, *Cheers! An Intemperate History of Beer in Canada*, 2009)

This Is War. In late January Amazon.com removed all its direct Buy buttons for Macmillan books, including the Tor sf imprint. Macmillan was being punished for trying to negotiate an 'agency'-style sales deal and more control over e-book pricing: Amazon prefers e-books to be loss-leaders as a selling point for its Kindle reader. Horrified authors saw their sales figures plummet; Amazon acquired many lifelong enemies. Two days after they used the nuclear option, a Kindle forum posting explained that this PR disaster indicated 'strong disagreement' with Macmillan, although 'ultimately, however, we will have to capitulate' – owing to Macmillan's disgraceful monopoly of Macmillan titles. (Conversely, a monopoly on Kindles is a Good Thing.) The delisting of books lasted a full week. Other major publishers, Hachette and HarperCollins, have since joined Macmillan in clamouring for a new deal.

Roger Dean had a 'powerful reaction' and 'mixed feelings' on seeing *Avatar*. Those floating island/mountains are so reminiscent of his iconic Yes album art that he's been deluged with congratulations for his assumed contribution. 'The film had the look and feel of my work for sure. [...] It was like they had access to my DNA.' However, 'I have been told by my lawyers not to talk to anyone...' (*Classic Rock*)

Christopher Hitchens limbers up to admire J.G. Ballard: 'As one who has always disliked and distrusted so-called science fiction (the votaries of this cult disagreeing pointlessly about whether to refer to it as "SF" or "sci-fi"), I was prepared to be unimpressed [...] The natural universe is far too complex and frightening and impressive on its own to require the puerile add-ons of space aliens and super-weapons: the interplanetary genre made even C.S. Lewis write more falsely than he normally did.' (*The Atlantic*)

Philip K. Dick's family may not be suing the *Oxford English Dictionary* for its wicked claim that the word 'nexus' appeared in English several centuries before *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), and in Latin a bit earlier than that. But they're making threatening noises at Google for calling its new phone the Nexus One. Supposedly this is a 'trademark violation' and a blatant steal from the book's Nexus 6 androids. (*Independent*)

The Weakest Link. Anne Robinson: 'What is the name of the London club that marks the start/finish point in Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days*?' Contestant, a teacher of English and music: 'Ronnie Scott's.' (BBC1) • Radio Clyde presenter: 'Which famous detective features in the Agatha Christie [*sic*] novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*?' Contestant: 'Is it Harry Potter?' (*Bookseller*)

As Others See Us. A new BBC3 series recruited sf, gaming, and comics fans, but only *utterly typical* specimens: 'Does your avatar do more exercise than you? Are you happier running round World Of War craft [*sic*] than pounding the treadmill at the gym? / If you love playing high-octane games or reading sci-fi and action based comics from the comfort of your sofa, but are turned off at the thought of real exercise, we want to hear from you.' So they can mock you.

Whiter Shade of Pale. Bloomsbury US did it again despite the 2009 furore over Justine Larbalestier's *Liar*. Another dark-skinned character, the heroine of Jaclyn Dolamore's *Magic Under Glass*, appears on Bloomsbury's cover as inarguably white. The publishers apologized and withdrew the book for reissue with a new jacket.

William Shatner reviewed genre-linked male perfumes, opining that Star Trek Tiberius Cologne 'smells vaguely like Captain Kirk after a hard day's work', while Spongebob Squarepants Cologne for Men 'had a harsh overtone of fried eggs and olive oil' and Spider-Man Cologne for Men by Marvel is infused with spider-strength: 'If you work out a lot and don't wash your clothes for about two weeks, this scent might cover that scent. Because it's really powerful.' (*Maxim*)



Langford mourns the Amazon.com capitulation

Awards.

Bram Stoker (Horror Writers' Association life achievement): Brian Lumley and William F. Nolan.

Crawford (new fantasy novelist): Jedediah Berry for *The Manual of Detection*.

Newbery Medal (YA): Rebecca Stead, *When You Reach Me*, featuring sf elements (time travel).

SFWA *Grand Master*, 2010: Joe Haldeman.

Thog's Masterclass.

Dept of Fearful Intimacy. 'Linda felt her mouth dry up, and her tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.' (Stephen King, *Under the Dome*, 2009)

Simile Dept, Continued. 'They were lifted off the ground like salmon plucked out of the Kushiro River as they headed upstream to spawn in the mountains of Hokkaido.' (Alexander Beshir, *Rim*, 1994) 'Like dying spiders his fingers crawled over the control panel, smearing it with blood.' (Frank Schätzing, *The Swarm*, 2004, trans Sally-Ann Spencer)

Dept of Terrifying Imagery. '“You see, Dr Roche, if tiny insects launched a concerted attack on your nostrils, your finely tuned, highly complex body would be in danger of

collapse.”' (*Ibid*)

Very Like A Whale Dept. 'Watching the oil-spattered Dean laugh and jump around reminded him of sitting on his grandfather's knee.' (*Ibid*)

Dept of Higher Mathematics. 'This is a ninety percent male society...we outnumber our women two hundred to one.' (Jacquelyn Frank, *Hunting Julian*, 2010)

As Others See Extraterrestrial

Relations. Hackles rose at a Bristol health club ad showing a green monster: 'Advance health warning! When the aliens come, they will eat the fatties first.' No one objected to blatant anti-alien prejudice, but the f-word was deplored. (*Telegraph*)

New Year Insight. '2010? Shouldn't we all be wearing silver jump suits with jet packs?' (first line of *Coronation Street*, 1 January)

Will Power. J.G. Ballard left over £4 million in his will, the bulk of it – after inheritance tax – as legacies of nearly £1.1m to each of his two daughters. His son got £100,000. (*Mail on Sunday*)

R.I.P



Kage Baker (1952–2010), popular US author of the *Company* sf novels, died on 31 January; she was only 57.

Knox Burger (1922–2010), US editor and literary agent who bought Kurt Vonnegut's first short story for *Collier's* and later represented various sf authors, died on 4 January aged 87.

Mog Decarnin (Karen Duff, 1948–2010), US fan who as Camilla Decarnin published stories and co-edited the lesbian/gay sf anthology *Worlds Apart* (1986), died on 8 January.

Roger Gaillard (1936–2010), former curator of Switzerland's *Maison d'Ailleurs* sf museum and editor/co-editor of several sf essay anthologies, died on 22 January.

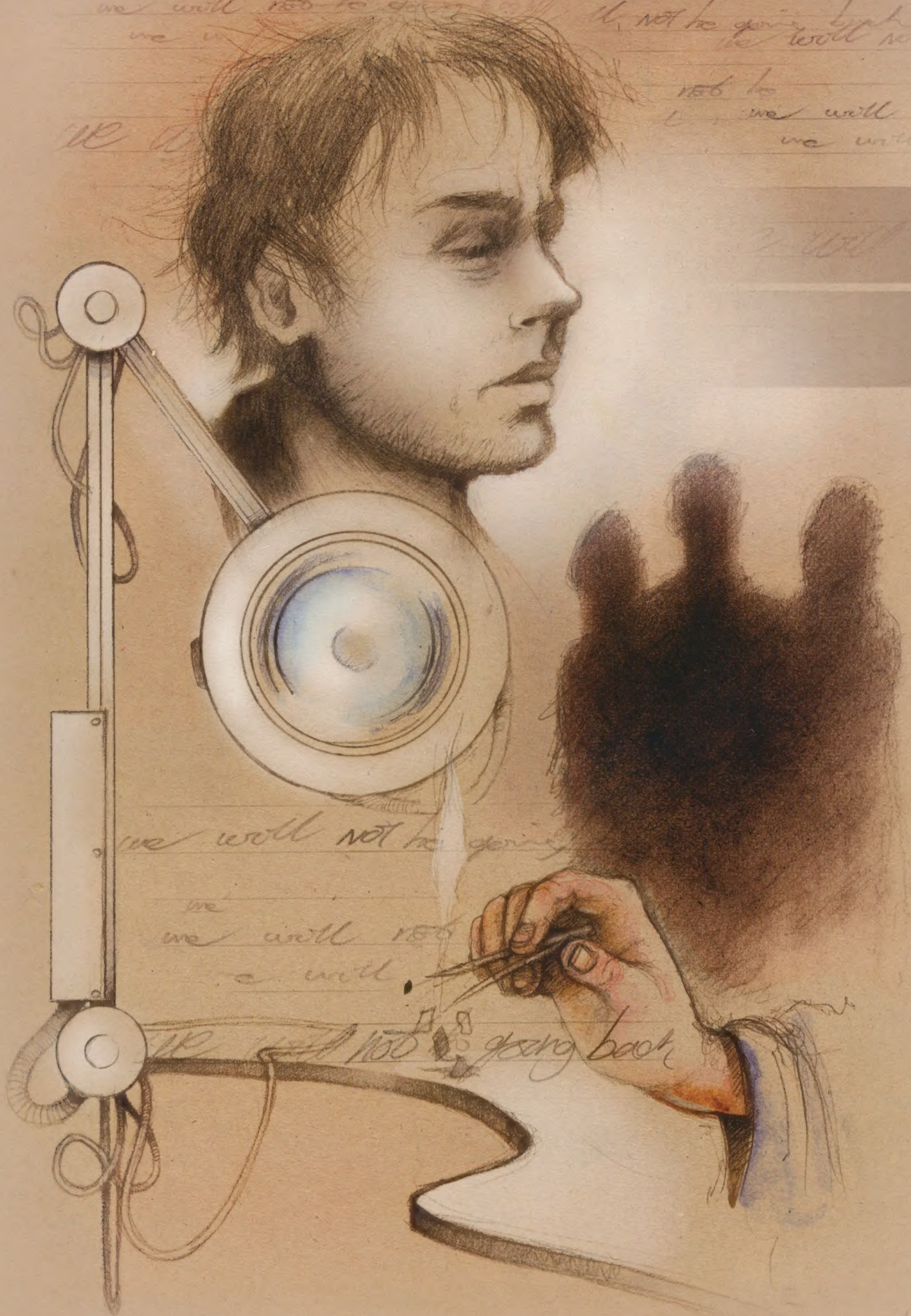
Mark Owings (1945–2009), US bibliographer (often in collaboration with Jack Chalker), editor and small-press publisher, died on 30 December; he was 64.

Takumi Shibano (1927–2010), leading Japanese fan since the mid-1950s birth of his country's fandom – of which he was long the chief ambassador – died on 16 January; he was 83. He wrote and translated sf as Kozumi Rei.

William Tenn (Philip Klass, 1920–2010), US author of many fine satirical sf stories – collected in several volumes – and two novels including *Of Men and Monsters* (1968), died on 7 February. He was 89. Unforgettably iconoclastic shorts include 'Brooklyn Project' (1948) and the prescient-seeming 'The Liberation of Earth' (1953). SFWA honoured him as Author Emeritus in 1999.

Ernesto Vegetti, important Italian fan and bibliographer whose catalogue of Italian-published sf has long been a major reference resource, died on 17 January aged 66.

Eric C. Williams (1918–2010), old-time UK fan active in the 1930s, and author of ten sf novels 1968–1981 (mostly from Robert Hale Ltd), has died at age 91.



JON INGOLD

THE HISTORY OF POLY-V

There were three of us in the lab at the beginning. I don't remember who was first to inhale. It may have been me, recording the smell in my notebook, maybe only checking if I had forgotten to add the ethanol. Back then the drug's effect seemed like nothing. It was subtle and hard to place. But we tried, all the same.

At the end of every week we tested our prototype, keeping meticulous notes, recording every reaction with a video camera. We were good scientists, even if others might say we were reckless. What we were developing was truly unique. Our method of data-gathering was adapted to our task.

Team Fridays became part of the job. We gathered at three o'clock in a circle around the coffee-table in the kitchen. Even Karen from the office was involved. Jamil rolled tape, Ian dated and detailed, and we laid out whatever props we had brought along. We tried everything in that first year: photographs, diary entries, emails and letters; T-shirts, books, sweets, tunes, a smell in a jar. Ian brought a broken LP. Karen brought a baby's cap. When we hired Elize Duffy straight from grad school in the US she brought a roll of dollar bills wrapped in a rubber band which, with a smile and twinkle, she did not explain.

Each in turn would settle, relax, close their eyes and take the tube. Flick open the stopper with a thumb. And then wait, and think, as it all came back.

From the observer's perspective, the experience of *poly-vivo mnemenia* (poly-V) resembles something between a deep reverie and a mild paralysis. Within the first six to eight seconds all visible motor functions cease, with face and shoulders relaxing and the mouth falling slightly open. Ventilation rate slows to as few as ten breaths a minute and – most notably, and unlike a dreamer's – does not appear to vary with what is being experienced internally. For the duration of effect (which for the first prototypes was between four and fifteen seconds) external stimuli have little effect. Eyes can be open or closed but are always unfocused and angled up. Shining a light on the pupil causes dilation but blinking does not occur. Eventual waking is unpredictable, and then abrupt and instantaneous, as though

– as Ian puts it – the user has “simply found the right door and opened it.”

From the point of view of the participant the experience is harder to describe. Let us say that, in the normal course of things, to remember is to *fall*: one starts with a broad scope and then focuses inward, tumbling, gathering speed and losing control, with more and more flashing past while there is less and less one can be sure of; until finally one touches down on a detail that does not obviously fit into the wider scope with which one began. The process we are accustomed to is erratic, unreliable, and prone to error. It is as though our memories form some parallel space through which we are dragged, crashing and bumping and tripping over things we did not expect to find.

With poly-V this fall is turned over to become a climb. The drug is not an index or a search-engine: the user does not take a dose and then review results. It is more like a torch, whose pool of light shows us where we stand. It allows us to take our time and choose our way. The drug steadies us, like a guide-rope or a walking stick.

But no more than that. The experience is not *new*. We have not invented it, only switched it on. It is as though, through some fluke of evolution, humans have lost the true use of our memory along with our tails and appendix. Poly-V restores to us something we had forgotten that we had.

I am trying to help you understand why we were happy to use it on ourselves before it was clinically trialled. It did not *feel* dangerous. It felt as natural as eating or sunbathing or unprotected sex.

I am a seventeen-year-old boy.

I am standing in a university dorm room a year before I have earned the right to be here. The walls are porous concrete that leak heat to the night outside and where they meet the ceiling there are moth-husks held in place by old cobwebs. The cupboard doors smell slightly of varnish. They are cracked around the lock; perhaps someone has tried to force it in the past.

I have an interview tomorrow. I have spent today reading a book I did not understand.

I am not alone. Standing beside me is a girl from my sixth-form college who wants to study medicine. She is leaning out of my window, looking at the river. She has come here, upstairs, to see it. There is no view of it in the room they gave her for the night. I told her about it earlier, as we ate, not expecting her to be interested. She held my arm as we walked across the quad.

She is quiet. She has had her interview already: it did not go well. She was nervous and did not say enough. She is saying nothing now. Twice she has looked back from the window and given nothing away.

I walk over and perch myself on the edge of the table. I say: "It's a nice view, isn't it? Can you imagine living in a place like this?"

She nods, taking the question more seriously than I had meant it. Then she says: "I have this thing about water."

She flushes red and adds: "I guess that sounds dumb."

I don't think it does. I begin to tell her about Newton's second volume, the one on fluids, that is never reprinted and barely even survives because it is all entirely, irrevocably wrong. I don't think she listens. She nods a few times and turn back to the night outside.

"I should go," she says.

We used to date, this girl and me. Three months at the start of term. I can remember exactly the size of her, although we never slept together.

"Do you have to?" I ask.

She laughs dryly. "Really set you up for your interview." But she is considering it. I wait with bated breath. Then she says, "You'll be fine as you are."

I accept. "Okay."

Later, back at college, when I have told this to my friends, she will claim I followed her into her room, barged through the door and sat on her bed, refusing to leave. I will deny it but at the same time I will wonder.

Now, I stand. An icy draught moves across my face as she opens the door. I watch as she slowly says good night. I know, clearly, that if I only held out my hand she most likely would take it. I do not hold out my hand. "Good night, Will," she says. "Good luck."

The door closes.

Our lab opened in January 2004, with me and Ian, and funding for two more. Having both worked on several other projects we immediately hired a junior researcher and an administrator. Only then did we set about kitting up our lab.

Progress was fast: we were following up existing work. By the end of the first year we had our first stable preparation; by summer 2005 pre-clinical PK studies were complete and we had submitted a candidate for Phase I trials. Then while we waited for results – the bureaucracy of the drug certification process being (quite rightly) formidable – we got on with the job of researching, iterating and refining our product.

We varied first the formula and then the method of release. The drug was inhaled, then pipetted under the tongue, and then injected in small quantities into the arm. This last came with dire side-effects: needles, it seemed, were too strong a trigger.

Adam watched his wife give birth three times before he declared he could stand it no longer. Fridays were put on hold while we experimented further. The tab was born.

The note in my lab-book from that time is very clear: "We will *not* be going back." Only now did we realise how unpleasant the drug had been before, with its sudden paralysis, like being trussed up. With the tab, the transition from one viewpoint to the other was smoother; furthermore, the slower release allowed us to safely up the dosage. We made variants with highs of five, ten, even twenty minutes. The amount we could remember became freakish, phenomenal. Our enthusiasm grew. Adam brought in a perfectly ordinary teaspoon and then regaled us with tales of all the people who had used it in his flat. Jamil brought in a conker and remembered a conversation with his father from when he was four. Ian brought along a bra: "I'd always wondered whose it was."

Only Elize seemed disappointed. "I miss the kick," she said. "The moment right after the needle goes in, when you're waiting for it to jump you. Back when the V stood for *vampire*." But the fact she said it only proved that we had moved away from needles for good.

We dropped tabs in a circle, laying our hands out palm upwards on the coffee table, each unpeeling one with the other hand and placing it on the wrist of the person to their left. (In the colleges down the road, the university academics were passing the port the same way.)

Adam did Ian, Ian did Elize, Elize did me, I did Karen and Karen did Adam. Jamil acted as our observer, taking notes, observing the time, and ready to call the hospital in case of disaster: at some point over the year he had decided to opt out of taking the tests himself. Karen and I talked about it once on the way out: "It must have been taking him somewhere he didn't want to go," she said. "He's a sad sort of person. Whatever poly-V is, it's not an antidepressant." I told her I had never considered Jamil like that: I found him cheerful, talkative, polite. "But," Karen observed, "he never talks about himself." She sighed. "Shame. We got on really well, me and him, back when I started out here."

The drug leapt in efficiency. We began to break our own rules. One day Ian came in, unshaven, having lost his keys and spent the night in his shed. He stayed at his desk long enough to pop a tab and remember using his front door key to lever open a tin of paint. He returned to work after lunch, showered and clean-shaven. The key had been lying on a shelf, a few inches from where he'd slept.

Karen took mild doses to help her keep the appointments book up to date. Jamil began to use again but only after experiments, to check through his methodology and accuracy. Adam took tabs before tackling the crossword.

We published papers and results a year or so behind what we knew. The funding rolled in. Phase I results showed the PVs, PKs and PDs we had expected; we prepared for Phase II. And all the while we were making our own poly-V stronger, smarter, cheaper, nicer-smelling. As we pipetted a sample three or four generations beyond what was crawling towards the market into a dish of neural tissue, Elize whispered: "You can almost see the



cogs turning." We were sitting on a gold mine. There was no stopping us.

I am four. The sky is bright and filled with dragons.

The moon is up. I have not told my mother but sometimes I sneak a look to make sure it is still there. I will tell my father when I see him. "The moon," I'll say. "The moon was out in the daytime." He will tell me it is due to surface tension, or the Gulf Stream, or static electricity, I am sure.

We are crossing a road. I do not need anyone's help to cross a road: I know all about cars and lights and anyway, I am the fastest runner in the whole world, except for the cheetah. I check the road for cheetahs in case one has escaped from the zoo. If one has escaped then I am sure no-one will have caught it, because cheetahs are so fast. (I cannot understand how cheetahs got into the zoo in the first place. Maybe the keepers waited for them to fall asleep. Perhaps they built the zoo around them.)

My mother asks me to hold her hand. She needs me, she says, to make sure she is alright. I am happy to help. My mother is the strongest, bravest person there is. I take her hand and lead the way, from one step behind.

Halfway across the road are white lines of paint. They are there to show you where to cut. We stop there. I make sure not to step on them.

I am looking down when I hear the squealing noise, and then I look the wrong way. I barely see the shiny red car taking the corner at something close to 40mph. The driver is a young man with long hair braided up behind his head. There is a girl beside him. She looks like my friend Takahiro from school except she is a girl, so her skin is coloured above her eyes and her lips are red instead of pink or brown. She is holding her hands against her cheeks: she seems to be laughing as they hurtle round the bend. Her eyes are very open. She is looking right at me.

My mother shrieks at the car to slow down but it doesn't. There are suddenly more dragons in the sky, along with an old lady with a stick and a sailor-man smoking a pipe like my Grandfather's. I am being held up by the arms; my mother has hoisted me into the air. The car has disappeared. It did not slow down.

My mother is shouting now, words I only sort of know. She is crying. I find her hand and squeeze it to show her everything is all right. This is why she needs me. We finish crossing the road.

On the other pavement a man and a lady hurry over to comfort us. They are friends. They sit my mother down and help her take off her shoe and sock. While they are doing it, another man wearing a torn denim jacket picks up my mother's handbag and walks away. I am going to pull my mother's arm and tell her because I think the man should ask first. I think he might even be a burglar, although he is not dressed correctly.

The man turns back to look at me and makes a very ugly face. I do not pull my mother's arm. I start to cry.

The lady puts her arm around me and tells me everything will be okay, that I've done very well, that I've had a real fright. She must have seen the man making that angry face. She is a kind lady, so everything must be okay. I settle down.

Later, I will tell my mother that her handbag was taken by a man with a torn denim jacket. She will not believe me. She will blame the couple who sat her down and made her take off her shoe when there was absolutely nothing wrong with her foot.

She will call them parasites on society. She will tell me that if I see them again then I should spit on them. That is what they did when she grew up, she says. I try to remember their faces but I can't.

I can pinpoint exactly when things changed. Exactly what we added and who prepared it. We kept meticulous records of everything; there were no mistakes or shortcuts, nothing fell by mistake into the centrifuge. I could even produce a sample of what we took that day: we have a cubic centimetre of every batch in the deep freeze, even the ones that did not work or that we threw away. The data at every stage is incontrovertible, inarguable, scientific.

But I can only pinpoint it now. At the time when it happened we did not notice: there was no change in how the drug felt. It is only looking back that I can find the date. 13th October 2006: Friday, of course. The group record for that day lists those present. Karen's name is not among them. In her place there is Abbi Collins.

We had all brought along our props. Mine was a photograph: five of the six of us, gathered in front of a wire Christmas tree in the lobby of our building. Jamil and Ian are wearing paper hats and standing arm-in-arm. Adam kneels in front. Elize and I stand to one side. I am holding two drinks and Elize has her arms out, chorus-line fashion, presenting the tree. Hanging from its branches is our award. We are celebrating the results of a clinical trial: our first signpost on the road to success. We compare ourselves excitedly to the developers of penicillin, paracetamol and Viagra. We are drinking seasonal champagne, except for Jamil, who drinks orange juice and vodka, and Ian who drinks Guinness from a can. Karen is behind the camera.

The sheet of tabs is fresh from the machine. Wisps of cold rise from each square. Wearing plastic gloves, Jamil breaks it up, loosening each piece with the tips of a pair of tweezers. He likes to ensure that everything is ready and correct. Perhaps he knows that variant 7d2 is different: perhaps he is watching us with interest. But I doubt it.

Ian goes first. His fall is deep but short-lived, perhaps only half a minute long (I dissemble: forty-seven seconds, as recorded in the log). His enormous face cracks open as he returns: laughter booms out. He has not brought any trigger beyond a single striped paperclip; now he shakes his head in amazement and says, "Cracking. Corking," but he does not explain. He stands, a little giddily, and goes to make himself some tea. He does not go home: he will wait to see us through. He is still smiling to himself, whistling as he fills the kettle. Jamil and I exchange looks: it is clear he has unearthed a treasure.

I am next. I prepare myself as Elize lifts the tweezers: lay the photograph down, put my feet together, fold my hands into my lap. I do what I can to remember unassisted: the dark corners, the fairy-lights above the windows, the low two-tone hum of the freezers and the centrifuge. The smell of strong alcohol and the pine air-fresheners we hung on the tree. I am happy, light-headed, relaxed. I am laughing freely. This much I remember on my own.

There's a touch of cold on the inside of my wrist: it is the edge of one of the two glasses I am holding. Somebody smiles. A camera flashes – Jamil is taking pictures for the records. I can

hear the tape machine turning. The bubbles in the glass crackle like sparks. Adam is sitting on my foot and Elize cannot keep her balance much longer, she is going to fall into the tree. I reach out to catch her arm and in doing so nearly ruin the picture on the table in front of me, which is suddenly no longer there...

We are standing beside the window, sharing a quiet moment with the cold night air. Elize is shivering slightly: she wears her lab coat over the party dress she pulled out from her top desk drawer. There is alcohol on my tongue.

We are toasting her first year in the lab. "Crazy times," she tells me, honestly, shaking her head as she speaks. "For a lab job. You know? What are we doing having such a great time?"

She is exaggerating prettily. She has drunk too much. "We're a great team," I say. "You're part of it."

I'm wearing a tie. The knot is too tight, but I'm afraid if I try to loosen it I'll pour wine on my shirt. Her glass is almost empty. The bottles have run dry. Ian jokes about opening a bottle from the stores, diluting it down. Go back to med school, Adam replies. Elize balances her glass on the windowsill, recklessly.

"I'm the first in my family to even go to school," she says. (She means university.) "My Dad still says any time I call him, get a real job, when are you getting a real job? He wants me to be a teacher or a secretary or something."

I nod earnestly. "Wait till we're on sale."

She shakes her head again: laughter falls out. "I don't believe it. That cheque we got today..."

We have received a Christmas bonus from the company for securing Phase II. I spent a fraction of mine in the wine shop.

"I had to read it over twice," she says.

I ask another question. I am enjoying listening to her talk. She has lovely rich eyes and a quirky smile that you could miss unless you knew to look for it. And even in a lab coat she has a great figure. Maybe after three glasses of champagne every woman does, but so does she, and she is being careless with it.

"What will you spend it on?" (That's what I ask.)

"Are you kidding?" She is serious. "I've got loans to pay. I only graduated last year, I'm up to my eyes in it." She lifts her glass to demonstrate, hiding her face. "Did I ever tell you what I did while I was studying, to pay my rent?"

"No."

She pauses a moment before replying.

"I was an underwear model."

I gawp. She nods.

"For designers. I strutted up and down wearing this stuff while all these camp guys took notes."

"You? Really?"

"Okay, don't look too shocked," she teases me. Her face is shuffling emotions: shame and pride, nervous excitement. "It was good money. And a *total* secret. My roommate thought I was a stripper. But it was better than proofreading, or working in a bar."

I am imagining her, a few years younger, pacing up and down a catwalk in suspenders.

"Okay, Will." She punches my arm. "You can stop staring now."

I make an apology and return to my drink. It is an awkward

moment: she is embarrassed. She puts her hand in her lab coat pocket and pushes it closed. There is no need: the dress she is wearing is sensibly-cut, decent. I am careful to look away, but it does not stop me from remembering every curve now.

"Will. I'm not kidding." She has put her drink down again. "Don't look at me like that."

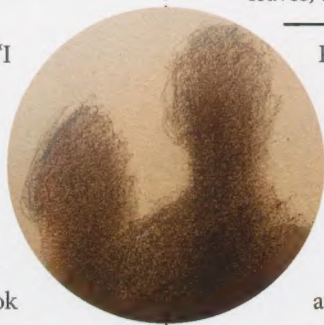
I don't understand. I am not looking. I tell her so. She pulls her coat shut and fastens the buttons.

"Jesus, Will. I wish I hadn't said anything. I thought you... I thought you were my *friend*."

I don't seem to be saying anything. I am looking at her coat. We are not talking, but we should be. We should spend the whole evening talking but instead I find myself observing: watching her without speaking.

"You know what?" she continues, more forceful now. "Sometimes I'd rather I still did it. There were all these guys and some were totally professional and some weren't. But at least there weren't any fucking *geeks*."

She's so angry she knocks her glass. It falls two storeys to the path below. While I follow it with my eyes I am remembering holding that glass, taking it to the kitchen, rinsing and restacking it. It shatters into diamonds on the ground. She stalks away, pulling her phone up from her bag. I watch her silently as she leaves, three hours too soon.



Returning from poly-V can be a disappointment, like coming back from holiday to find everything at home is still the same. It can be a relief. It can end smoothly, one time turning into the next and it can be shaky, like a time-lapse film jumping between day and night. It can leave you ecstatic, calm or disillusioned.

This time there was nothing. Glass, clear. I was aware, like the other place had never been. Around me things had switched. Ian had returned with his tea. Jamil was leaning at his shoulder, whispering. Elize had changed places with Adam so she was no longer sitting beside me.

Her hair, which had been long, was cut short.

The first batch of poly-V was pushed by the company through an extensive Phase III as if they couldn't believe the findings so far. We were not asked to participate but received monthly updates by email. Over a thousand members of the public were shown lists of numbers or pages of photographs, then given poly-V, sugar pills or coffee, and asked questions. The results were not unanimous: in any test some people make mistakes while others wilfully answer incorrectly. But the individuals do not matter: it is the majority that matters; the trend line. And the trend line pointed up.

The drug was licensed for sale as a mental pick-me-up, an alternative to caffeine. Its medicinal nature was played down and its herbal roots played up. It was sold as a pill, flavoured with (organic) peppermint. It was marketed to students, night-shift doctors, barristers, teachers. Small print declared it unsuitable for drivers and pregnant women, the latter clause based entirely on legal advice. It sold fast.

We began to receive a royalty. Adam cashed his in and left

to take up a lectureship in Oxford. Elize took three months off to travel. Karen received nothing because she was only clerical staff. Jamil bought her a week's holiday in Tuscany for two as a surprise and she accepted it but took her sister. I remember wondering how I could match his generosity. I donated two thousand pounds to stopping the trade in illegal ivory, and spent the rest on a car.

"I have this thing about water."

Some memories are stronger than others. They bring you back, time and again, like a night warden checking in on his rounds.

"I guess that sounds dumb."

It does not. I tell her so. I tell her I think water – especially water by moonlight – is beautiful. It is unpredictable, endless, formed by everything around it and yet unbreakable. She listens, agreeing, taking my hand that I hold out as I speak. Her fingers are long, thin, cold from the window frame. She tells me that she loves to draw rivers but can never quite catch them, they are always getting away. "That," she apologises, "must sound *really* dumb." I ask why she is applying for medicine and not art college and she shrugs. She does not know. Something about her Dad. I tell her she draws wonderfully.

I am still holding her hand. We are looking out of the window at the water together. We used to date: I remember exactly the size of her. I put an arm around her waist and she leans her head on my shoulder. She tells me how awful her interview was, how nervous she had been. She tells me she admires my confidence, how I don't seem to be scared at all. I tell her that I'm petrified. She shakes her head and tells me I will be okay, she has seen it. I am more at home here, in this place, than she has ever seen me before.

I kiss the top of her head and she smiles and says good night. Later, back at college, she will tell her friends that she came back to my room and we talked, but that then I had started to creep her out so she made an excuse and ran.

Karen returns with a heavy tan and three bottles of Chianti. We have moved from tabs to a roll-on, our prototype built from an old deodorant bottle, cleaned out, decontaminated and micro-waved. We have filled it with our latest batch. The concept is simple but effective: the longer the roll, the more powerful the result. We are discussing how to make this marketable – a head with graduations, perhaps? A tap-measure with every stick? A stencil for your arm? An LCD odometer on the bottle? Ian declares we are wasting our time, that pills are the universal indicator of medicines over drugs and we should stick to them. I disagree: I like the hit of the roll-on, the sense of gathering memories, drawing them out from your skin. I like the control.

"I was telling my sister about it," Karen says, undoing the cuff of her shirt and rolling up her sleeve. She has not tried it like this before and she is keen to go first. She blanches: we are sworn by contract to secrecy. "She was asking about the money," she explains, "so I had to tell her, didn't I? And she just lit up. Acted like I was someone famous. Like she was, too, because we were travelling together."

"We should be famous," Jamil says. "I get spam emails trying to sell me this stuff. Not like when we started."

"No." Karen's expression turns serious. "My sister was asking

about her friend's Mum. She's got Alzheimer's. She wanted to know if that's what we were doing. Curing it."

She looks around at us, one person at a time. Elize smiles in a kind way but Ian is more blunt and shakes his head. "If it works, great. But it's not bloody going to."

"But it might?"

He shrugs. "I suppose it might."

The skin of her wrist is pale compared to the backs of her hands. "It would really be something," she says, "to be working on something like that. Something that could really save people." She laughs. "When I came for my interview here I thought we'd be making sun cream or something. I didn't pin you lot for geniuses."

We smile and shake our heads. Jamil puts a hand on her shoulder and says, "This place nearly fell to pieces while you weren't here." Karen looks at me and Elize and we nod. Karen offers me her arm.

"I've missed this part," she says, still beaming.

She closes her eyes and sits up straight: Karen likes to have good posture when she goes in, as though she wants to present herself properly to whoever she is going to see. I touch the roll-on to her skin and draw it along. Her body relaxes; she falls from her posture immediately; she is gone.

We talk between ourselves, quietly at first and then louder, more confident that we will not disturb her. We become distracted by something so that when we look back she has slipped out of the room. No-one comments. Her jacket is removed from the hook by the door and her mug from the dishwasher. Her desk is emptied and her computer account erased. Her replacement has already been fixed up, she knows us all by name and can find her way around. She is in the kitchen, making a last cup of decaf in the percolator. She does not join in but sits and half-watches, half-reading a glossy while she waits to set the alarm (she has the code already memorized). Her name is Abbi Collins. Her name is on the plaque on the admin office door: it has fingerprints on it. She keeps the door closed because she has the radio on. She is twenty-four. She is good at computers and can fix the printer when it jams.

Jamil sits beside me with his shirt-sleeves already rolled. He is holding a copy of his first published paper, which he'd delivered to acclaim in San Francisco. I apply the roller to him. He watches with his precise, sad eyes. "A little more, please, Will," he says. I pull the roller further.

The group notebook is passed on to Ian who takes detailed, accurate notes of the time, the dosages, other physical observations. The record is correct and indisputable. Looking back, it makes no sense to me at all.

Our second-generation product is launched internationally under a new name designed at great expense to call to mind the old one. A sequel, from the makers of... It is still a pill: no-one is happy to market a tab, despite all of the advantages, and liquids and roll-ons are considered too "out there" for most consumers. Every step of delivery is managed. Where neurochemistry leaves off, economics takes over. The poly-V that is released is a diluted, muzzled form. It is always good, we are told at company presentations, to keep something in reserve. Stay ahead of the curve.

The drug appears in a film called *Catching Up With You*: a

heart-broken man takes poly-V and experiences several erotic flashbacks before deciding to murder his ex's new lover. He is stopped at the last minute by the woman who appeals to his better nature using the exact words he spoke when they first got together. They kiss. She, it is revealed, has been using poly-V as well. The film is a flop and rightly so. We celebrate our success and their lack of it with a meal at the company's expense. Abbi complains that we were not invited to the premier but of course, even though everyone knows poly-V, no-one knows us. Drugs, Ian remarks sagely, are not invented, they are only *discovered*.

We find our own interest in poly-V starting to wane. It has been a long project – three years and counting – and most of the key work is complete. Elize leaves, moving to America with her husband and their first child. A second is due. Our team is now once again myself, Ian and Jamil. The lab is quiet. We skip some Fridays entirely, working four days and then going out and enjoying the summer. On the occasions I test a new batch I do so alone, returning to the same handful of memories, no longer for enjoyment but scientifically: using them as controlled tests to observe changes in accuracy and depth. I take careful notes. They are exhaustive and precise.

I begin to graph the fluctuations. They are on the rise. Then, a jump.

I am twenty-three and breaking up with my first serious girlfriend. We have gone to a restaurant to do it; we are trying to act like adults. She says she wants to travel and see the world. I tell her that other countries are the same as here: the same kinds of people solving the same kinds of problems in the same basic ways. She tells me I am cold, determined to be lonely, that I have shut myself down. She whistles the shutdown music of a computer. She is glamorous these days, expensive, prettier than I could have hoped. Since leaving university she has flourished. I could no more hold onto her than I could hold a candle-flame.

She asks what we could possibly have seen in each other. I start to panic. I am going to cry and she will leave me here, crying, along with just the bill for company. I am certain this is what will happen. I can see it happening as I watch her mouth move.

"You're a self-centred cow," I blurt. The words leave a stunned silence, like a shattered glass. "You were just the only girl I could get."

I am standing up. She is saying something back but I don't listen. Outside, the air is cold and smells of smoke. The pub next door is having a barbecue. I go inside, wondering if I will see anyone I know.

I am drinking – quaffing – champagne. Elize is grinning, ecstatic: she is young, she cannot believe her luck. She is surrounded by adults and does not want to get found out.

"Did I ever tell you," she asks, "what I did while I was studying? To pay my rent?"

I feel sorry for her. She is a good scientist, an excellent addition to our team. She is careful, insightful, and calmly ambitious. She will go far. She should not be worrying about fitting in around us, about being liked. She should not need to take risks here,

where it could affect her future.

"Put your bonus in the bank," I tell her. "Maybe your kids will have an easier time of it."

She nods, but doesn't know what to say.

"Enjoy your evening," I tell her, and then move away to join the old guard in the armchairs.

The next day we will talk over coffee, more comfortable than we have been before. I will offer her a lift home and a cup of coffee. We will begin to find things out about one another.

I am a boy of four. I am with my mother, the strongest woman in the world. I am helping her to cross the road, watching carefully for the car that will try to knock us over. When it comes I am going to pull my mother clear. I am going to save her. I am quite sure this will happen. I have seen it.

My mother is a stride ahead of me, tugging on my arm. "Hurry up," she complains, in her beautiful voice. She turns to look back at me. There is a sound, the screech I was expecting. I rush forward to stand in her way.

There are dragons in the clouds and an old lady with a broom. She is frozen, mid-sweep. Perhaps she has forgotten what she is about. Perhaps she has been clearing cobwebs away but has realised she is a cloud and so is made of cobwebs herself. The slightest wind changes her body, bends it, breaks it apart.

I hit the ground before my mother scoops me up in her arms.

I am seventeen and horny as all hell. The girl by my window has a thing about water and we are watching it flow along the river, unstoppable, disappearing under the bridge. She has come up to see it, so she says. She isn't sure why she has come up.

She tells me that her interview did not go well.

We talk about options – we are young, we have all the options in the world, because we do not know how hard some things are. She talks about art college, about life-drawing and workshop space and exhibitions. I tell her I have seen her drawings; they are very good.

We kiss, easily, without fuss. We used to date, back at the start of college. I remember the shape of her exactly. She seems to remember the shape of me, too. Two fingers touch my side then run an inch down, tracing the length of my scar.

She chews her lip. "Can I see?" she asks.

I nod, and pull up my T-shirt, then pull it over my head. It is a cold night and the window is open. Goose-pimples ignite across my skin, except for the dead strip, still deep red, just above my hip. She strokes it gently.

"Can you feel that?"

I shake my head. "No. Only the stretching. The skin around can feel that."

"Like a ripple." She smiles.

With shaking fingers I undo the middle button of her shirt. She watches me with interest, curious to see what I will do next. We dated before, but never this. I open another button. She does not ask me to stop.

"Can I ask you something?"

I nod.



"Can you feel it? You know." She glances down, towards my foot. "When you take it off. Is it like it's still there?"

I kiss her neck. "I take it off when I go to bed," I say. "It itches sometimes."

She watches me for a slow heartbeat. Her shirt is hanging open. Her chin is tilted slightly down. Our arms are around each other.

"Can I see?" she asks.

We become an office of mothers-to-be. First, Elize announces that she won't be coming to any more Fridays or – and this is where she collapses into smiles – drinking any more alcohol for a while. We celebrate at the local. She holds my hand and we discuss maternity cover. By now we are one of the most famous groups in Cambridge. We receive unsolicited CVs through the post. Ian jokes to Elize, "Don't you worry about us. We'll have you replaced in minutes."

It must all get Abbi thinking, because a month later she is confidentially breaking her news to us, one-by-one in the kitchen as we come to make coffee. Replacing her will be difficult: good admin staff are hard to find. We will need to advertise. Jamil and I discuss it over a sandwich; he reminds me of the endless interviews when we were just starting out. He mentions one candidate with a rueful smile. I never told you this, he says, but I phoned her up after the interview. Took her number from her CV. We went out for a drink. With a shrug he adds, it didn't last long. The pretty ones never do.

I struggle to place the name. Thompson, he says, like the travel company. Karen. She was a nice lady, well-qualified too. He looks bashfully at me. Very unprofessional, he says.

He is in a confessional mood but I don't feel like a priest. I am tired; it has been a long week and my foot is sore. At the weekend Elize will drag me out shopping for equipment, clothes, mats, flannels and dinosaur spoons. She does not want me to stay for the Friday night tests any more. She says a father should live in the present and not in the past. (She is right but I hate to be told: I am a scientist, and would rather theorize for myself. But sometimes, science is simply too slow.)

I tell Jamil cynically that he should look the girl up and see if she wants a job. He shakes his head. "I don't think she'd want to hear it from me," he says. I nod. I find him childish, beneath his rational, Holmesian manner. He is like a boy play-acting at being a man. I consider taking him to a park so he can climb trees. I will make sure he is not on the interview panel, but thinking back, he was not on the panel before. He should not have met any of the candidates. Whoever this woman was, he probably scared her off.

Elize heads home before the end of the day, taking the car so she can go via the supermarket. I will work late and take the bus. Then we gather in the kitchen, just Ian and Jamil and me. We start the microphones and the camera. Jamil brings a test-tube smoking from the freezer and carefully fills the old spray bottle we are using as an applicator. (It once held sunblock: it has been washed, sterilized, and decontaminated.) These days we spray ourselves on the nape of the neck, just above the brain stem. I have a rash there sometimes.

The lady in the corridor is older than the others – twenty-seven,

I'd guess, although by law I'm not supposed to. She is more confident, too: dressed smartly but simply in a skirt, cotton top and jacket. When I pass her she looks up and makes eye-contact. When I pause she puts out a hand. She introduces herself. "I'm Karen Thompson. I'm here for an interview."

I shake her hand. "I'm on the panel," I tell her. "Will Sheppard?"

She nods. "Doctor."

"We'll start in a few minutes, once someone from HR shows up. Can I get you anything while you wait?"

"No, thank you." She does not shake her head, but keeps eye-contact and an organised smile. "The other man is getting me a coffee already. Young man with glasses?"

"Jamil."

"He didn't introduce himself."

"I'll call you in a few minutes."

Karen pats the edge of the seat beside her. "I'll be right here."

I consider going to the kitchen, taking the cup from Jamil's hands and bringing it to her myself. But I don't. I go to wait where I am supposed to, in the room down the hall. Through the glass wall I see them talking. Jamil is laughing with gusto.

The interview begins. Karen sits very upright, impeccably presented, making sure as she answers each question to look us in the eye, one by one by one. She has brought her coffee in with her but is careful to only sip when she is not about to be asked something.

The interview goes fast. She has skills and experience: she understands funding reports; she can handle the awkward, cautious manner of scientists. I ask her what attracted her to lab admin in the first place. She beams: it is a question she has evidently prepared for.

"Admin is all about supporting people," she replies. "What's important for me is that I know that the people I'm supporting are doing something that really matters. I'm no scientist myself" – she smiles – "but I think the potential of poly-V is really quite amazing."

She finishes speaking. She is well-trained and knows that a good answer – like a good story – has a definite beginning and also a definite end. It does not offer multiple explanations or risk contradicting itself. It is precise, like a polished stone, so that the panel can bring it easily to mind again later.

But her answer is wrong. I am staring, quite suddenly alert. Neither Ian nor HR with his clipboard have noticed. Karen is looking at him. Then she looks at me and colours, ever so slightly. "Someone mentioned poly-V to me earlier, in the hall," she explains. "The man who brought me my coffee. I think it sounds fascinating."

It is a good answer, but it is a lie. She sits across the table from me, smiling pleasantly, adding nothing. She looks only at me. She has noticed her own mistake but is hoping to brazen it out.

HR has finally noticed the change in the air. He looks at me with the gentlest touch of puzzlement. The interview is no longer going well. We wrap it up. "You weren't too keen on her then, Doctor Sheppard?" HR asks when she has left the room.

Her coffee is still steaming slightly on the table. Outside the room, our lab is being set up. Jamil is dealing with the paperwork on the equipment until our administrative position is filled. We have not begun work on the product. Poly-V is unformulated.

It does not yet have a name.

The third generation of poly-V passed trials. It was found beneficial for all kinds of memory: recollections under the influence were demonstrably detailed and accurate, corroborating perfectly with other sources. The drug moved from modern marvel to accepted fact. It became standard in police stations, hospitals, therapy rooms, retirement homes, universities, schools; it was used by actors, politicians, researchers, journalists, authors, lawyers, GPs and taxi-drivers. It was cheap to manufacture and safe: no side-effects had been established beyond the usual drowsiness and possible nausea that are also side-effects of a placebo pill. Poly-V was declared consequence-free. Competitors began to emerge.

I have been taking poly-V to try and remember the history of our group. Elize does not approve: she says it is unhealthy to always look back. She says that we were there, we know, we do not need to know more. But I am a scientist: knowing is not enough. I intend to understand.

I work carefully, step by step. When I remember the lab I avoid remembering her, never thinking through our meeting or our long, uncertain courtship. She is too precious to me to lose. Instead I go back. I remember Karen and speak to her, about poly-V in tab form and about Jamil, the “sad, generous boy.” She knows me, well. She knows Elize and Adam and Ian. I both know and do not know her. The more I remember, the more comes back; memories I do not own. The records show that, on my own recommendation, we did not offer her the job. I do not know where she is now: I could phone her up, but I do not think she would know my voice.

I am a scientist. I collect facts like fragments and when I have enough I will attempt to form a chain. But I am not hopeful. My record books are useless, filled with contradictions. Things are changing all around me, every day – new people come and go, new places, new ideas and names. I find myself in water. Only the present can be relied upon, and the future. (I will stop using when I feel my daughter’s first kick. When that happens I will resign myself to what I see and hear and leave the problems of existence to the younger ones.)

I am a scientist. As a scientist, I hope to understand. Also as a scientist, I know I never can. True understanding is the preserve of the religious. All I can aim for is to leave things in a better order for others. Perhaps someone, eventually, will understand. Perhaps they will be a scientist. Someone like me.

One day you will wake up to find you are a man with a wife and a child and a leg that detaches just below the knee. You will not know this man, nor understand how you came to be him. You will not know why he made the choices that he did, although others may try to remind you. You will assume that he did what he could with what he had. You will make up stories to tell to others to help explain yourself. You will learn these stories by heart. You will listen to the stories of others and sometimes, almost without meaning to, you will incorporate them into your own.

You will do all this, every day. There is no way to test it.

Jon Ingold is a writer, playwright and games designer from Cambridge, UK. He has previously published stories in anthologies and online, and you can try his award-winning interactive fiction at www.archimedes.plus.com.

DANCE OF THE KAWKAWROONS MERCURIO D. RIVERA

WINDSWEPT CONFETTI.

That’s how Annie had described the Kawkawroons when she first spotted them hovering miles away against the white sky, bookended by the twin suns.

We crouched low on the edge of the cliff while hundreds of feet below us the blue waves of the Equatorial Sea crashed against the pebbled shore. In the distance, the rust-red peak of a derelict tower broke the surface of the ocean. Built by a long-extinct civilization before sea levels had risen, tens of thousands of these submerged skeletal spires dotted this alien waterworld.

Our transport ship sat behind us in a patch of flatland atop this butte. After swallowing a thimbleful of Inspiration a few months ago, I’d invented the shipcloaker, which allowed us to sneak past the quarantine patrols in orbit.

Annie handed me the binoculars and I trained them on the Kawkawroons. The creatures’ fluorescent plumage blazed in the sunlight. “It’s not too late to turn around and forget about all this,” she said.

Typical of her, pretending to try to talk me out of a course of action only after she was certain I had fully committed to it. This then gave her license to say “I told you so” later. I completed our little dance by making a sour face and shaking my head as I handed the binoculars back.

One sun was setting behind us while another was rising ahead above the cobalt horizon. The winds whipped so hard that my yellow parka flapped noisily, and I had to tighten the hood on my jacket.



With their keen vision, the Kawkawroons would have spotted us by now, despite the enormous distance. When the winds let up for a moment, I stood up and waved my arms over my head. Two of the Kawkawroons settled on top of the distant tower; perhaps they had established nests in the abandoned steel structure before sea levels had risen. One of the others, however, separated from the flock and homed in on us, expanding its wings, riding the gusts until it hovered just feet from the edge of the cliff.

Strangers. From the angle at which the worldbreath carried me I could make out the two strangers on the edge of the rocky perch. One of them waved its naked wings – was it a mere chick? – signaling that it wanted to play with me. I circled and circled but they refused my invitation to race.

Why did they tease me so?

Below me, Great Mother's blue-green waters churned and slapped against the cliffside as if She played her own special game. Half of me still slept after the weeks-long journey across the ocean. I did not want to wake my self, because then I might want to rest instead of play.

The strangers huddled together and pressed circular stones to their eyes. They swayed their featherless wings left and right.

Fine, I thought. I will approach. But if I set down how can we chase each other through the clouds and fly upside down and dive into Great Mother to hunt salty eels? How can we sing within stony outcrops to create clever echoes? Perhaps the strangers wanted to roll in the dust and bathe with me?

I got as close as possible without landing – *careful, careful* – so that my other half might stay sound asleep.

The Kawkawroon floated in the air with almost no wing movement. Its large bulbous head wobbled, as if too heavy for its thin neck. Bright yellow and aquamarine feathers sheathed its angular torso, which was twice the size of a human body. It had two exposed bones like forearms folded beneath its expanded wings, and its face looked frighteningly proto-human, sharp-chinned, with a protruding blue beak instead of a nose just atop a lipless orifice. Its perfectly round left pupil tracked our movements while its right eye gazed blankly in a different direction.

"This is insane," Annie said. Despite her words, I could sense her excitement. She was simply looking for reassurance.

"No, it's okay. It's just observing us. The Kawks tend to be tame after their migration across the ocean."

"How do you even know...?" She closed her mouth. "Oh."

Inspiration.

Annie's question reminded me to activate my earpiece translator. *The translator she'd invented*, I reminded myself. Annie, who had trouble with high school Spanish. Annie, who had zero tech experience and tended bar with me at Norton's for as long as we'd been together.

She poked at her ear, triggering her own translator.

Holding my hands at my side, I raised my left knee as high as I could. Then I extended my right arm, palm up. But when I went to bend my right knee, a blast of wind made me lose my balance and stumble backwards.

"No!" Annie said. "It has to be precise!"

"I know that!" Although how I knew it – how Annie knew it – I couldn't say. It was Inspired.



"The strangers huddled together and pressed circular stones to their eyes. They swayed their featherless wings left and right"

I began again: two lifts of the left leg; three lifts of the right leg. A twirl. I extended my right arm and wiggled my fingers. Bent at my waist.

"Slower," Annie whispered in my ear.

She shot me an exasperated look, one I'd seen too many times before. "Let me," she said. With a shake of her head and a cluck of disapproval, she set to the task at hand, starting the dance from scratch.

In five minutes, she completed the Invitation to Speak.

The Kawk hooted and mimicked her precise movements, completing the elaborate dance while riding the wind. Then it further extended its multi-jointed stick-legs, as if about to land. But it remained airborne.

"Friends?" it said. Its voice was an extended coo, even through the translator.

"Friends," I said.

It did a midair spin. "Let's play, friends! Let's chase each other through the clouds and dive for –"

"Can you help us?" Annie said. "Where is your nest?"

So much for careful diplomacy. After we'd traveled so many light years, I guess Annie wasn't about to pussyfoot around the subject now.

My breastbone thudded rapidly when I realized these were not chicks. The strangers displayed the colors of our people, but they were not Kawkawroons! I screeched at the sight of their flat faces and featherless bodies, so startled that my other half almost woke up. One of the strangers approached as if to play with me, and started to signal that it wanted to speak. Then it changed its mind. Maybe it was shy. The second stranger – much friendlier than the first – completed the invitation. But could they even speak Kawkawroonese? The strangers had called to one another in a language I had never heard before. Low-pitched growls like those of the mimisets.

The one nearest to me reached into its strange coverings – which I had mistaken for feathers – and pulled out a glinting pebble that it placed in the side of its head. The rock flashed like lightning, startling me, and their language changed from gargling nonsense to the soothing squeaks and chirps of Kawkawroonese.

"Can you help us?" the stranger said. "Where is your nest?"

I skipped in the air, delighted that the strangers could speak. They wanted to be my friends! Only friends asked each other for help. I stopped. But why did they want to see my nest?

I could feel my other half stir.

"Come, friends," I said.

I dropped from the edge of the perch and swooped to the cave a hundred feet below us where I had built a nest months ago. Worldbreath held me aloft while I waited and waited for the strangers to follow. Finally, I flew back to see what had delayed them.

I found them doing a very odd thing.

They molted! They shed their coverings – revealing more of the same feather-like material underneath, only hideously

black. If they had looked like this when I first saw them, I would never have wanted to play with them. In the back of my mind, before I knew they were strangers, I had hoped we might even frolic above the clouds and bask in the sunlight. But no more.

Rather than fly, they lowered long strings, like vines, over the edge of the cliff, and clutched them tightly. I hovered beside them as they squirmed down the cord – like the cancapikas of the Green Islets, inching down towering trees. I trilled at the rocks and made magnificent echoes. But the strangers remained silent.

They were no fun at all.

Instead, they gathered food from between the rocks. Perhaps they did not want to play because they were hungry? But rather than eat the food, they cawed, and then let it drop to Great Mother, which made no sense at all.

I clutched the rope and rappelled down the cliff face another five yards. Annie followed a few feet above me.

We'd stripped off our blue-sleeved yellow parkas to avoid attracting the attention of any more of these creatures. One would do for our purposes.

The Kawk screeched louder as we descended. "There's no damn way that thing is tame," Annie shouted. I could barely hear her in the howling wind.

Now she's cautious, I thought, after telling the creature point-blank we were interested in its nest. My friend Gilbride, the xenobiologist who'd allowed us to sip the Inspiration back on Earth, had warned us that these creatures had complex dance rituals, and moods that could shift from docility to aggression at a moment's notice. The Kawks were genderless and all of them could lay eggs, but we knew few other hard facts about them. We knew even less about the extinct aliens whose civilization once thrived on this world. Intelligent life was rare enough that Exo-Gov had declared Kawkworld off-limits to everyone but anthropologists and xenobiologists, of which we were neither.

Dark spots speckled the rocky outcrops of the cliff. The cavern into which the Kawk had flown earlier opened up about two hundred feet below us. The creature sounded so child-like. Hopefully it was mature enough to have a nest.

The Kawk moved dangerously closer, fluttering less than two feet away from me. I pulled my gun from its holster and waved it at the creature, but it didn't back off.

Annie shrieked suddenly, her voice disappearing in the howling wind. Holding on to the swaying rope with one hand, she swatted at her arms, her head, and pulled down her hood.

Pain shot through my arm. When I looked down, something the size of a crab, an insectoid, sat on my wrist, antennae squiggling. I swiped at it and sent it hurtling into the ocean.

Another sting on my leg. My back.

I lost my grip and fell. I swung in circles, suspended by the harness around my waist.

The scorpion-like specks that dotted the cliff wall swarmed towards us.

I continued to swat the insects off my arms and legs, sending them plummeting to the waters below. Some had found their way underneath my backpack, and I couldn't reach them.

A squawk.

The Kawk swooped in and plucked the bugs off of me with its

beak, throwing its head back, swallowing them whole. It darted back and forth from me to Annie, gorging itself on the black insects. Soon the wave of specks on the wall abated, disappearing into crevices in the bluff.

"Are you okay?" I shouted.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God..." Annie continued to swat at the insects though they were no longer there. Her blonde ponytail draped over her left eye.

"We're not far from the cavern." I tried my best to calm her, though I think I was really trying to calm myself. Eventually I started to edge downwards again, and she followed. As I released some of the rope with my right hand, I rappelled down the wall, avoiding the overhanging rocks.

The Kawk, now quiet and seemingly bloated, remained at our side in the swirling air currents.

We reached the aerie an hour later.

The strangers hid in my nesting den and refused to come out to play. Maybe they were hoping I would go look for them? But that meant I would have to land, and that would wake up my other half. I had no choice.

I unbent my legs and wiggled my toeclaws. Then I swooped into the entranceway. The strangers, who had been crouched in the rear of the den, scrambled away from me and held their hands over their face. They were very funny. I spread my wings wide and set down.

And as my bare feet felt cold stone, I woke up.

Like the suns emerging from behind a cloud cover, my head cleared and I felt whole again.

I retracted my wings into my back-pouch and stretched my legs. After so many weeks of flight, it felt unnatural to walk again. I rubbed the plumes on my left ribcage, which were caked with sea salt; that side of my body felt weary after so many days of wakefulness. Each of my halves had taken turns sleeping during the great migration.

Then my other self reminded me: I had strangers in my midst. I should not have been surprised, I supposed. These were not the first visitors to show an interest in a Kawkawroon brood, if the myths were to be believed. But I had doubted such tales were true until now.

The creatures had placed a triangular blue covering over the center of their faces in an attempt to simulate a beak. A sign of respect, no doubt. They had somehow restored their handsome blue-and-yellow appearance, and approached tentatively. Each of them placed a hand to the repulsive flap of flesh on the side of its head, where a shiny substance glittered. They then performed the lifont dance in a methodical if awkward fashion, moving with precise arm and leg motions. These creatures were small but quite heavy given the sound of their stomps. Amazing. The legends spoke of strangers who undertook voyages that made our own migrations pale by comparison – voyages from islands beyond the clouds, places so distant it would take an entire lifetime to fly there – and that our destiny would forever be tied to theirs. It had been said that such visitors had delivered our people to Great Mother at the dawn of time. But *these* flat-faced wingless creatures looked like no strangers I had ever heard described before.

I decided to join their lifont dance. They faced me and I

mirrored their precise movements – or did they mirror mine? – and we lost ourselves in the motion. I extended a leg, swept open a wing, puffed my chest. I danced not merely out of courtesy, but out of a genuine fascination with these creatures.

When we finished, one of them stepped toward me. Like before, the glittering objects in their skin flaps blinked red and their vulgar growls morphed into the familiar high-pitched whistles of civilized language.

"Thank you for directing us here," the stranger said.

"But of course," I responded. "How could I deny shelter for the wind-weary?"

"You sound...different." I could not read the expressions on the speaker's flat face – how could it even defend itself without the sharp edge of a real beak? – but the tone of its voice reflected surprise.

"Than when we spoke before?" I laughed. "What did you expect?" Part of me, after all, had been asleep earlier. Both my halves were fully awake now.

The creatures repeatedly looked at each other before addressing me, part of their bizarre foreign rituals no doubt.

"I don't understand," one of them said.

Perhaps I had given the strangers more credit than they deserved. I tried to hide my disdain but it whistled through. "The great migration here from our southern nest took eighteen days of flight. Completing such a long voyage would have proved impossible unless we took turns sleeping."

"We?"

"Of course, both of us." I pointed to my left side and my right side, wanderlust and nestmaking, frivolity and solemnity, passion and aloofness. Did the strangers even know the difference between up and down?

They flicked their ears and spoke to each other in their guttural growls and moans so that I could not understand them. I found this ill-mannered. On the other hand, it occurred to me that I had not shown much courtesy myself. As tired as I was, they must have been even wearier given the distance of their migration. And I had neglected to offer them food or drink.

I made the proffer, regurgitating a dollop of sweet sanlop at my feet, but the creatures declined.

I should not have been surprised given the churlish manner in which they discarded food during their climb down the cliffside. They moved like mudworms, these strangers, like crippled Kawkawroons on their deathbeds. How did they traverse Great Mother? And how could they travel without wings to the islands beyond the clouds, if such stories were to be believed?

"You desire one of my brood, do you not?" I said. Kawkawroonese tradition required me to tender one of the lifefonts in exchange for their dance. But the creatures had already declined food, so I expected them to turn down the offer. Imagine my surprise, when they bobbed their hideous heads and said, "Yes! Yes!" like stunted chicks.

I moved to the rear of the cavern and stepped into the nest. And as they watched, I crouched in the mound of weeds and wet soil and laid a dozen lifefonts. I cupped one.

When I turned to hand it to them, one of the strangers pointed an object at me that shone like quartz. This must have been their way of reciprocating for my gift of the lifefont. Perhaps the creatures were more polite than I thought.



"The creatures repeatedly looked at each other before addressing me, part of their bizarre foreign rituals no doubt"

One of the strangers carefully took the lifefont from my hand, cradling it as if it had already hatched.

I, in turn, stepped forward to retrieve the shiny object the other one was offering to me.

Thunder.

Pain.

Terrible agony.

I dropped to the floor, writhing, clutching my left side.

"Did you have to shoot it?" Annie said.

"It came at me, goddamn it!" Why did she always have to second-guess my every move? So much had changed in the months since we'd consumed the Inspiration, but our parrying remained the same.

"I'm just saying. These are *intelligent* beings. And we're not even supposed to be here." She cradled an egg against her chest while pressing the blue breathing mask over her face to try to tolerate this cavern's unbearable stench. "Then you go and shoot one down like it's a pheasant or something."

The Kawk lay on its side, hooting pitifully. I'd blown a hole clear through the left side of its torso and wing pouch.

I took a misstep and slipped in the puddle of black vomit it had left. It had obviously made itself sick from eating too many of those insects.

"What if those bugs were venomous?" Annie said. The red welt on the side of her face had grown to the size of an apple. My own arms were numb and swelling up where I'd been stung.

"Hopefully the ship's medbot can treat –"

"Hopefully?" she said. "Look at us! What are we doing? *We weren't supposed to shoot it!*"

"It's done! There's nothing we can do now." When I removed another egg from the nest, the Kawk let out a pathetic screech. I held up the egg against the light of the cavern entryway. Perfectly round. Crystalline. Transparent. The yellow sac had a green spot at its center: Inspiration.

Annie's eyes gleamed and I could see that her qualms about hurting the Kawk had instantly evaporated at the sight of the yolk. It was enough Inspiration to last us for years to come. We might even sell some of it; there was certainly high demand for it in the black market on Earth.

"Do you realize how much this can change our lives?" I said.

She paused for an extended moment. Then she silently zipped open her backpack and made room for the eggs. Between our two bags we had enough room to clear the nest and take all twelve eggs with us.

The Kawks squawked ferociously as we removed each additional egg from the nest. Who knew what drove it to hand over one of its eggs after our Inspired dance, but it sought now to protect the remainder of its brood, an understandable reaction. I'm sorry, I thought. You encountered a more advanced alien civilization and paid the price. How many species in the universe have met the same fate?

I craned my neck out of the cavern inlet, and looked up.

The insects had re-gathered on the cliff wall so I retrieved the electroprod from my backpack to clear the path for our climb to the landing spot above, where our transport ship awaited us. With any luck, we'd be back on Earth in a month.

My left side floated in and out of consciousness.

How I wanted to make the vile creatures pay. If I could have moved right then, I would have taken out their eyes with my beak.

Why did they have to hurt me? Vicious, ungrateful walkers!

But when the strangers crouched down and began to empty my nest, removing lifefont after lifefont, I forgot my pain and yawped with delight! Kawkawroon legend spoke of so many other strangers of different shapes and forms who had followed this same path. I did not understand it entirely, but I knew this was all part of the prophecies, part of the sacred, unknowable plan.

I was dying.

In my final moments I yearned to take that final dive into Great Mother's embrace. If only I could move; I could not move...

Warm worldbreath. Cradle me; carry me on my final sojourn toward sweet-smelling perches beyond the endless white clouds...

The sun set over the Maui coast while I sat at my desk poring over the latest reports. Still no progress in replicating Inspiration in a lab setting.

I smiled and rubbed my eyes, turning away from the screen to take in the sunset. To think that a few years ago I'd been tending bar at Norton's Pub across the way from the Honolulu Xenobiology Institute, and now I was an actual member of HXI's R&D staff. In the year since Annie and I had returned, how many other human beings had benefited from tasting Inspiration? I had let a few close friends try it, though I hadn't told Annie. The truth was that I'd fought a constant temptation to share it with everyone I knew. How many others had experienced that amazing rush, that thrill of Inspiration? Quite a few, judging from the number of revolutionary discoveries exploding across the globe.

Construction of the island tower was almost complete.

A knock on the office door. Annie glided into the room wearing yellow sweatpants and a tight T-shirt, sipping bottled water. From her movements, her expression, I could tell she had good news.

"Spill it," I said.

"It's official. Moscow, London, Shanghai, Sydney..." She counted on her fingers. "Towers are going up in all the major cities. With the quarantine lifted, we won't have to worry about our Inspiration supply any more." She did a little twirl. "Thousands of Kawks are being shipped over."

"I don't know." I scratched my chin. "Are we sure they'll produce eggs here?"

"If we perform the ritual dance..." She shrugged. "It wasn't just my idea, you know. Dozens of Inspired people independently came up with the same plan. Have you heard about this month's other inventions?" she said.

I shook my head.

"A synthetic compound that provides all the nutrients that the Kawks need." She started counting on her fingers again. "A

chemical bath that simulates the composition of their ocean so they can stay healthy and disease-free. An AI-driven communicator that allows us more nuanced interactions with them so we can follow their complex rituals and maximize egg production."

"Wow, that's great news."

"Can you imagine what else lies ahead with the help of Inspiration once the Kawks are settled here? Cold fusion, AI tech, genetic engineering... Who knows?" She paused, staring sideways out the window.

"What's the matter?"

"Do you ever feel, I don't know, a little guilty about all this? About what we've done to the Kawks?"

"Guilty? Not really. We're treating them well." I understood what she meant, but it was just the natural order, a pattern repeated throughout human history. Cultures colliding. Conquest. Yes, we had conquered the Kawks, but it wasn't as if we'd *really* enslaved them. The creatures would be given free rein here as long as they continued to supply us with Inspiration.

"How about we stay home tonight?" I said, putting my arm around her waist. Annie's tight sweatsuit usually revved me up, and she knew it, but I made the half-hearted offer more out of habit than any real desire. It had been months since we'd slept together.

"I have another idea," she said, wiggling free. And I knew immediately what she had in mind: something better than sex.

"Let me guess. Inspiration?"

She smiled. "Just a teensy bit. I'm close to finishing a force field that can regulate temperatures to make it more comfortable for the Kawks to lay eggs."

"So you'd rather work than make love? I'm hurt." I jutted my lower lip in a pretend pout.

"Aw, poor baby." She kissed the tip of my nose. "Join me?"

I nodded. The truth was that I had my own project I wanted to complete – a sonic amplifier that generated complex echoes that pleased the Kawks.

As we headed out of the office toward the lab, I stopped at the window and stared at the skeletal spire that had been rising higher and higher into the grey sky.

A feeling nagged at me that I was missing something.

"So how long do you think before construction of the tower is complete?" I said.

"Not long at all," she said.

And at that moment, an image struck me. An image of countless Kawkawroons perched atop tens of thousands of towers across the globe, the human throngs staring up at them, blank-eyed, dancing at their feet.

"What's wrong?" she said.

I froze, struggling to retain the thought, but just like that, it disappeared like daylight behind a pulled window shade, eclipsed by a burst of sudden Inspiration.

"Nothing," I said, itching to get to work. "Nothing at all."

Mercurio Rivera notes that during a trip last year to the Galapagos Islands, he learned about the strange sleep cycle of albatrosses that traverse hundreds of miles of open ocean for days at a time, the left and right halves of their brains taking turns snoozing during these epic journeys. This bit of information served as his own source of Inspiration for 'Dance of the Kawkawroons'. Mercurio's website is mercuriorivera.com.



It's forty years since Jim Hawkins published his first SF story in *New Worlds*, and he reckoned it was about time to write another one. Meantime, he has written hundreds of hours of film and TV, and several stage plays. Jim lives in Hull, teaches screen-writing at the university, and can usually be found in the Pave wine bar.

CHIMBWI

Jim Hawkins

A narrow plain ran between hills. The grass and small trees were almost colourless in the searing African sunlight. Jason headed across the plain towards a narrow cleft. A group of startled duiker jumped out from behind a bush and escaped up the far hillside into the trees in a series of elegant leaps. He stood, shading his eyes, and watched them, before climbing down the bank into the dried-up bed of the Kalambo River. After a hundred and fifty years the antelope were back.

Jason walked carefully, avoiding sharp stones. His bare feet were tougher now than they'd ever been, but he still hadn't developed the iron-hard soles that evolution had provided for and a life of shoe-wearing had made feeble. He'd never been much good at walking on pebbles.

The sides of the river bed were the rusty red-brown of laterite, soft and crumbly, rising about ten feet above him on either side. To his left, on the Zambian side, the bank was dark and damp in the shade, but on the right, where it was Tanzania, it was baked hard in the afternoon sun, overhung by thorn trees. The light was intense, almost heavy, and he rubbed the sweat from his forehead with the back of his forearm and wiped it on his grey shorts.

Where a small stream course met the river he looked up the lowered bank to where the terracotta pantiled roof of the John Desmond Clark Centre was shaded by a grove of eucalyptus trees. A little further down the bank, as if on cue, a lump of flint was exposed near the top of the gully. Jason prised it out and held it in his hand. It was a good axe head, but not perfect. The strike-plane was ragged. It was a reject. A hundred and sixty thousand years ago an axe maker had thrown it down in disgust. He wondered where archaeologists like Clark would have

got to if Stone Age quality control had been a bit more lax. If all these tools had gone out to do their job these sites would never have been found. This was ancient concentrated industrial waste, but more natural, more appropriate in some way, than the devastated spoil heaps of Dagenham and Longbridge, the twisted steel spaghetti of what were once high-speed railway tracks that weaved between the fallen cooling towers of defunct power stations in the ruins of a far-off England.

The shadows had hard edges, like the flint tool he held as he walked. Fifty yards more and another artefact lay on the river bed – a flat tin the size of his hand, corroded but intact, its label long gone. He turned it over with his toe: Italian rations from the First World War, washed down from a trench somewhere, possibly still edible after two hundred years, but he didn't have a can opener, so he'd never know. Still, he bent down, picked it up and put it in his pocket.

On either side of the river the elegant, impossibly thin towers of solar fusion reactors reached two hundred feet above the scrubby savannah trees, occasionally flashing blinding stars of reflected sunlight, strange flashing flowers reaching for the wispy floating thermal clouds.

The noise of the cicadas came and went like the sound of a vast orchestra of string-less violins. And then the call of something, perhaps a dog, perhaps a hyena, echoed from afar.

Ahead the river bed was beginning to widen, but was still narrow, only about thirty feet from side to side. The soil underfoot was turning to patchy grey rock cut with a channel by millions of years of water flow.

Jason walked out from the banks of the river to the gorge. Hills reached up on either side. The valley opened up in front of

him as he walked, sweat soaking his shirt, his feet hot, and went to the lip of the falls. The river stopped here on a knife edge and fell a thousand feet to the gorge floor below. He was standing at the narrowest point of a sheer-sided gulf. A few billion years ago the land had dropped to make the vast cleft of the Great Rift Valley. He stood on the edge of the rock. Marabou storks circled above the jumbled rocks of the river course below on wide dark wings. He was so high that these huge birds were flying beneath him. In the far distance, he knew, lay Lake Tanganyika, but the heat haze caused the landscape to fade out into indistinct brightness and blur.

He stood on the edge of the rock shelf and looked down. Suddenly he almost wanted to leap out and soar with the marabou if only for a few seconds. It would be easier to fall than to resist. A marabou wheeled close to the cliff as though challenging him to fly. There was no voice in his head, but a force that welled up from the ancient parts of him pushing him towards the drop and the silence, and then something clamped the force, stifled it.

He stepped back a few feet, took the ration tin from his pocket and hurled it out over the lip. It arced steeply downwards, and then a quick laser light flashed from above him and to the left. The ration tin vaporised and the marabou scattered down the valley into the blue green mist.

Jason looked up the path into the hills on his left. Miriam Bwalya stood, wrapped in a brightly-coloured *chikwembe*, her Bemba skin so black it had midnight blue highlights. She was completely still, watching. How many seconds passed in this subjective moment? Time stopped for him as he stood between the lip of the dried-up waterfall, the thousand foot drop, and the unmoving form of the woman with the cloth wrapped around her and a laser pistol in her hand.

He walked slowly up the gravel path until he came to her and went down on one knee, held his hands together in front of him, and said, "Mwapolenipo baMiriam."

"Mwapoleni mukwai," she said. At last, after a few seconds, but many subjective centuries, he lifted his face and looked into her brown eyes.

"Yes or no?" she asked. He nodded. "Eya mukwai."

She turned and walked up the steep path. Jason stood and followed her. In the clearing half way up the hill, where an area had been flattened for tourist buses, was a small flyer, hovering on an anti-gravity field that Jason, despite his physics PhD and maybe a hundred research papers, found technically inexplicable. It looked like an ivory thigh bone, but he knew they could make it in whatever shape they felt like. Around the flyer there were groups of people, black, silent, and an old man sitting in a chair slowly waving a fly-whisk in front of his face. Jason walked slowly towards the Chief and went again on bended knee, looking only downwards to the gravel chips, suddenly aware of the loudness of the cicadas and the distant call of the storks.

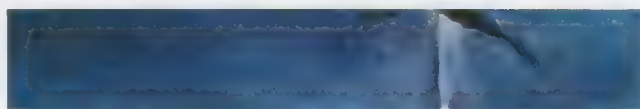
"Mwapoleni baChiti," he said quietly. The old man leaned forward and grasped him by the shoulders first, and then lifted Jason's head with a delicate touch. His hair was turning white, like frosted charcoal. He smiled. "Cungulo baJason. Whoever called you Jason probably hadn't read the right stories," he said. There was the sound of a tiny bell. The chief looked at his wrist watch and said, "Sorry – I really need to take this call," and dis-

missed Jason with a flick of his fingers.

ChiBemba, the language of the Bemba people of northern Zambia and half the Congo, was a difficult language if you weren't born to it, inflected at both ends of a word, about seven noun cases, and hundreds of greetings, proverbs and forms of abuse. What other language had a single word meaning *may your grandmother's vagina be opened wide and stuffed with sand*? He was grateful for the chief's use of English; but then they all spoke perfect English most of the time, except when speaking to him.

Jason walked over to the flyer. A hatch opened in the side of the knuckle end of the 'bone' and the pilot looked out. He pointed at Jason, tugged at his own shirt, and said, "Fuleni." Jason was suddenly aware of about a dozen people standing and watching him. As he stripped he didn't care much about most of them. He was only embarrassed that his mentor, Miriam, should see him naked. He was pleased to see that she averted her eyes.

He turned and walked naked up to the steps of the flyer, then turned back and retrieved the stone tool that he'd dropped.



It had been a long hard journey to get here from ravaged England through war-torn Europe, through the Balkans and down the Greek mainland. He remembered it only too well, and the worst was the two days and nights he'd spent spewing his guts up into the Mediterranean...

Was it like this for the Argonauts? Did the ancient Jason hang onto the side of a Greek fishing boat and vomit into the dark blue Aegean? Did heroes suffer the same indignities as refugees? Jason's stomach was empty and only the last traces of bile retched out to feed the fish.

At least Kostas Kiriakos, the owner and captain of this boat, had the intelligence not to overload it. They turned south from Paleochora and headed down from the Mediterranean off southern Crete into the Libyan Sea. Jason's intelligence was malfunctioning, he realised; he had become completely subject to the whims of his inner ears. He was a slug, or a cockroach, or a tortoise, but not a human and certainly not, for these interminable hours, a physicist.

The ocean was piled up in rolling ultramarine white-topped waves and the boat was rotating in unpredictable ways. Kostas didn't seem bothered by this, and stuck lamb souvlaki under the grill in the galley. The smell of hot lamb and onions swept over the seventeen men and women clutching the gunnels, causing a chain-reaction of stomach spasms to grip the refugees.

Jason let go of the side of the boat and lurched towards the galley, targeting the door frame and managing to grasp it. Kostas looked up, smiled and held up a piece of barbecued lamb. "Eat," he said. "You'll feel better. An empty gut is a bad thing." Jason forced himself to take the meat and began to chew it. So far, so good. It was a long way to the Libyan coast and he knew he must eat. East of the boat the hills of Gavdos Island seemed to rise above the wave crests and then drop. They were passing the most southerly outpost of Europe. Greece had survived the catastrophic and chaotic collapse of the EU, the two and a half

metre rise in sea level when the Antarctic ice shelf melted, better than most. The sandy beaches of lonely Gavdos were gone, the island had shrunk a little, but the goats had never signed up for civilisation anyway. True, Athens was a disaster zone, but throughout the mountains of the Peloponnesian region, down the islands of the Aegean, the Sporades, on Lesbos and Crete, the Greeks simply threw away their mobile phones and went back to shouting. When civilisation collapses, those closest to their peasant roots survive.

Kostas dropped them at a small Libyan jetty just before dawn, waved, put the engines into reverse, and backed out into the darkness. He'd been well paid in gold and diamonds. He'd fulfilled his side of the bargain, he'd delivered them to this isolated bluff, but he could not give them anything more than a microscopic fragment of hope for their future. He put them into the hands of the Fates, the *Moirai*, the deciders of the immutable track of destiny for gods and men, set the boat on a northerly course, poured some of his mother's dark red fruity wine from a goat skin into a cup, sipped, and then tossed a small libation into the ocean. It was the least he could do.

The promised refugee-smuggling transport didn't arrive. They stood together on the jetty and waited, hungry, thirsty, apprehensive in the darkness. Eventually the headlights came. They were rounded up by an armed Libyan border patrol, herded onto the back of a lorry, and taken to a holding pen outside the refugee camp at Cyrene for interrogation. The guards gave them water, couscous and olives. They were all tense and nervous. Jason picked at the olives and felt an overwhelming sense of despair, apprehension, anger and guilt. He had run away. He should have stayed with his dead friends and his dead wife and his dead science and raged and burned his way into the inevitable darkness of chaos and death.

The officer, a lean man in his forties with a neat moustache, checked Jason's iris scan against the image stored on his passport and sat back.

"Most people throw their passports away, Professor Johns. Why bring it here?"

"To prove who I am," said Jason.

"But why come?"

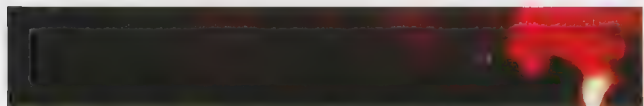
"Twenty kilos of Semtex in my laboratory. Six of my colleagues shot. This is not the best time to be a scientist in Europe. I'm sure somebody on this continent can find a use for me."

"Perhaps. Until then, I'm afraid, even scientists have to dig."

Jason felt fear overwhelm him. He wanted to run. He wanted to scream.

The officer locked a transponder bracelet around Jason's wrist, pointed to the door, and turned to his computer and made a note on the file.

Suddenly Jason felt the fear, guilt and anger curl up and compress themselves into something like an itch in his right arm.



The ship from Libya to Dar es Salaam had been crowded and filthy. Here, in the hills of Tanzania, they weren't badly treated, but the work was hard. The cage went down the shaft at high

speed, still lurching as it braked at the bottom and the gate opened. There were twin tunnels under construction. Jason climbed with the others from the lift into a low train running up the wide water tunnel, twenty feet across, lit with bright points of LED light. He had a sudden vivid memory of the London Underground. Down-slope from here the tunnel descended in a shallow gradient for sixty miles to the Tanzanian coast near the southern town of Mtwara and then a further five miles under the Indian Ocean.

Jason was working in the second, parallel, smaller tunnel, which would carry superconducting cables. These would bring current from the solar fusion plants five thousand feet up in Zambia to massive pumps along the water tunnel that would lift seawater three thousand feet to a desalination plant in the hills above Lake Malawi. There were sixteen systems like this, each tunnel emerging into the sea along the Tanzanian coast, and more in Mozambique. Power for water – it was a good barter.

Africa was greening again. The evaporating lakes were filling. Rivers flowed. Irrigation ducts fed the fertile fields. All of this was because a remarkable breakthrough by the Zambians converted the sun's rays into electricity at a phenomenal 98% efficiency. They weren't telling anybody how they did it.

Jason was working in a gang of six attaching steel lining plates to the superconducting tunnel and welding them into an airtight lining, preparing for the vacuum that was needed. The other five refugee workers were German, and rarely spoke to him, not because they didn't speak English, but because they were all *suppressed* by their wrist-bands. He'd hardly had anything amounting to a conversation with anybody since he embarked on his long and dangerous journey from England. He would have expected a camp of several hundred forced labourers to have a loud, violent culture, but it was more like a Sunday School camp. They didn't sing; they didn't shout; they didn't fight. They'd had an emotional epidural.

A shift with sizzling blue welding arcs in his face was pretty sure to bring on a headache. He'd just finished a join and lowered the torch when he felt a tap on his shoulder. Mbanga, the site manager, gestured for him to follow.

An hour later he was showered, dressed in clean shorts and shirt, and sitting in the comfort of a high speed maglev train, eating maize and curried fish, drinking cold beer, watching out of the window for the occasional glimpse of giraffes or elephants. He was on his way to the wealthiest country in the world. As the silent train rounded a banked curve at three hundred and twenty miles per hour the towering heights of Kilimanjaro came into view to the north. The summit was no longer snowy. The land outside the train was sandy and dry with widely-spaced baobab trees standing with their enormously wide brown trunks out of proportion to the number of branches above them.

A tall African with an aquiline nose (legacy of the Arab slave traders who operated in this region in the nineteenth century) walked down the train and sat facing Jason. The suit was light blue and looked like class. His dark eyes met Jason's light grey eyes across the table.

"How's the food, Professor Johns?"

"Very good, thank you. And your name is?"

"Not important. So. What do you think?"

"About what, Mr Not Important?"

"Fair enough – the name's Arisa. About your situation..." He took Jason's passport from the inside pocket of his jacket and pushed it across the table.

Jason left it where it was and wiped his mouth on the pressed white linen napkin. "I think I *just* prefer this patronising slavery to dirty bombs and marauding fascists." He was trying to let the anger come, but it wouldn't.

"Not slavery. You chose to come. I don't think my ancestors climbed on the ships and held up their hands for manacles." He pointed to Jason's wrist band. "We took you in. Millions of you. We feed you and give you beds and pillows and blankets. Look – even beer! What do you think of this train?"

"It's – impressive. But..."

"What?"

"If you put it inside a vacuum tunnel you could double the speed."

"Phase two, Professor Johns."

He spoke quickly in Swahili to what seemed to be his watch. Instantly the train began to slow until it was not far above walking pace. Beyond a pair of baobab trees was a pile of black wreckage, sharp wing shards, engine nacelles, fragments of cockpit windshield. Jason recognised many of the parts. It was a shattered American stealth bomber. Dark stains spread out across the sand from the impact.

"The Americans still don't understand how the Zambians have shot down every missile and every nuclear attack plane."

Jason tried to be angry, but it was impossible. Stick to the rational, he told himself. There was a quick flicker of the memory of his wife's bloody dead face. He pushed his plate aside. "It didn't need to happen. You could have saved Europe and America if you'd shared the technology."

Arisa leaned back and laughed ironically. "We were starving. Did you help us? No. We were ravaged with disease. Did you help us? You turned the atmosphere against us, the rain stopped, the deserts spread like cancer, the crops and the livestock died, the lakes began to shrink, the young fish boiled until there were no more. Did you help us? Did you?"

"No. But many of us wanted to."

"Not many enough. What you *don't* know is that many of us would like to see a more generous regime. Here, in Tanzania. Not there in Zambia. It's a local issue, but also maybe global. If we could have their solar fusion here we could do business with the Americans, the Chinese, the Indians, and even Europe. And you, Professor Johns, could have whatever you want. Learn what you can. And think about having your own research centre with unlimited resources. Now we approach the border. We *will* speak again. *Kwa heri.*"

He eased out of the seat and walked towards the end of the compartment.

"By the way – Arisa is a girl's name. We have to be a bit careful. So do you. After a few hundred years of digging out copper for the white man the Bemba have remembered that they used to be warriors. Oh – and we would take the suppressor off your wrist."

Half an hour later the train slowed to a halt at the border crossing at Nakonde and an announcement on the PA system invited Jason and two other people to leave the train. It was like climbing out of the belly of a sleek, air-conditioned orange-green snake.

Arisa, the man with a girl's name, smiled from a window near the front of the train as it lifted from the black monorail and accelerated silently away towards the south. The air was warm and fresh in this vast central plateau of the continent, here at about five thousand feet NSL (New Sea Level). Jason walked up the platform behind a couple who looked as though they were from China or somewhere in the Far East. They pulled suitcases on wheels. Jason carried nothing.

At the end of the platform, amongst a stand of eucalyptus trees, there were six arches of twisted filigree glass. The platform was embedded with small LED lights. Ahead of him a moving pattern of green lights ran from the feet of the Asians to the arch on the right. He carried on walking. Lights began to pulse below him towards the left-hand arch. He followed them.

As he passed under the arch there was a sudden pulse of something like pain under his wrist band – halfway between an electric shock and an orgasm. He cried out in surprise. He was immobilised for a few seconds. And then, for the first time in his six months in Africa, the wrist band spoke to him – a deep musical contralto voice: "Welcome to Zambia, Dr Johns. Take the path up to your left."

She was waiting over the brow of the hill, looking down at him, tall and narrow-waisted with a golden, red and green cloth wrapped around her, tied in a knot above her breasts. Her hair was a cap of short tight curls above dark brown eyes. His wrist ached, and he flicked his hand to shake the irritation away.

"Sorry about that," she said. "When people cross the border it's possible to get the biometric data less painfully, but it's a bit slow and tedious. Come... Oh, let me introduce myself..."

"I know who you are," said Jason. "You may have switched off half of my brain function, but I can still recognise Dr Miriam Bwalya when I see her."

She smiled and nodded a humble acceptance. He followed her across a tarmac car park to what turned out to be some kind of flyer, although it looked like a big pink plastic elephant in a children's playground. Much to his surprise, he laughed out loud, and carried on laughing as he climbed the steps into its belly and sat beside her on a wide comfortable bench seat looking out of its huge eyes.

"Do you do flying pigs as well?" he asked. "I can't remember the last time I laughed. I didn't think it was possible!"

She laughed with him, perfect white teeth flashing. "We can do you a flying pig if you want one. You can even have a straight-edged, sharp, European-style, high-tech-looking little boys' fighter plane, if you like. We tend to prefer curvy things. These are only shells, as you perfectly well realise." She added a couple of words in a language he didn't recognise, and the flyer lifted off vertically, and then drifted forward over the eucalyptus trees and away to the north, without making a sound. Curvy things definitely defined Dr Bwalya, Jason thought irreverently.

The Zambian breakthroughs in physics were well-guarded, but he knew he was sitting next to one of the key players. Miriam Bwalya was known to be a child prodigy who went on to become a formidable laser theorist. She was rumoured to be the architect of the solar fusion reaction that had lifted her country from a subsistence economy blessed with a few copper mines to a world-dominating power. And here he was, sitting next to her in a flying elephant, watching hills and trees rolling

by below. Her physical presence was disturbing; he felt flickers of something sexual pushing against the constraints of the wrist-band's grip.

She waved a finger in front of the grey surface below the eye windows, and the music started. African rumba. Long ago the slave traders took their human cargo from here to the Americas, and the slaves took with them the complex polyrhythm of their drums and marimbas, the antiphonal singing rising over the driving pulse of the percussion. They melded it with hymns and chain gang songs. And then, in the nineteen sixties, it came back to the Congo and South Africa and the Rhodesias in vinyl records and on the radio as a rumba to be taken and modified and brought home; a prodigal music child that needed a little re-education. This music made even the most inhibited, the most mind-bound, long to dance.

"You've had a long, hard journey," she said.

"That's for sure."

"It's not quite over yet."

"I realise that," he said. "If it was you'd have cut this off my wrist by now."

"We've been attacked. We've been infiltrated. We've been subverted. We only tracked you yesterday, because the Libyans are holding a lot of stuff back. The Tanzanian's didn't get who you were until we asked for you. They had decided to keep you, but we cut their power for a few minutes and they saw reason. And then, of course, there was a man on the train."

Jason ignored this. "The flyer never goes above about two hundred feet," he said, "from which I assume you're using some form of magneto-dynamic field effect."

"It can go higher, but the energy cost rises exponentially. Why bother?"

"Why bother with me?"

She held up a fold of her *chikwembe*. "If you look closely you'll see a few loose loops. What seems perfect cloth has tiny imperfections. So it is with our physics. It's just possible that you can tie off a few loops and close a few holes."

"Specifically?"

"Specifically comes later."

Jason smiled ironically and said, "So what *vaguely* comes next?"

The flyer dropped its trunk over a hillside, coasted down over the town of Mbala, and settled onto a landing strip beside the low white buildings of ZIAP, the Zambia Institute of Advanced Physics.



What came next was that five months later he still hadn't been allowed inside ZIAP. He did know that the buildings at ground level were window-dressing and the real labs were deep underground.

"It's not personal," she said, as they sat on a log in the dappled shade of a pair of *miombo* trees, drinking the cold beer she'd brought out to him. She pointed upwards. "If this tree had just one leaf, we'd burn. The leaf there doesn't know what that leaf on the other side is doing. It doesn't need to know to do its job,

which is to keep the whole tree alive."

He was getting used to the fact that the Bemba had a proverb for everything, and if they didn't have one they made one up on the spot. But he also knew that a lot of the Zambian scientists here did not have access to the main part of the Institute. He was not alone.

"Left to its own devices," he said, "one caterpillar can eat a lot of leaves."

It wasn't her style to giggle, but she did. Then she was suddenly sober-faced again. She reached into her bag, took out a sheet of smart paper, and threw it in front of them, clapping her hands and speaking a command in ChiBemba. The paper unwrapped itself and hovered upright, turning from ivory to silver. For a moment he could see the reflection of both of them – his white skin now a gently even brown, her black hair touched with just a hint of grey over her ears, her dark eyes capable of flashing from warmth to anger in a moment, his grey-green eyes half-closed against the sunlight.

"We didn't want you to see this until you'd recovered," she said. "But now I must show you."

The smart paper listened to her voice, and then the images began: in England, Bradford laid waste, Muslims and Hindus crucified, black bodies in the streets of south London, pyres of burning bodies like sick cattle, dark-skinned children dying of radiation sickness. In France and Germany, heaps of Arabic people awaiting the bulldozers, and following the collapse of the EU as more and more countries pulled out, constant nationalist wars. In America, Harlem poisoned with a dirty bomb, the trees of the Carolinas full of rotting human fruit, and everywhere the lightning-flash flags and the pasty triumphalism. Half the world had imploded as the seas rose and the green land scorched. Dark-skinned peoples raced for rain-blessed regions, economies collapsed, and the blood of scapegoats began to flow.

The video ended and the screen silvered. He looked at Miriam's face in the mirror.

"It's much worse than you thought," she said. "We cannot let them have the technology. We cannot! Our neighbours will sell it to them. We can trust nobody."

"Including me."

He turned away from her and felt salt tears run down onto his lips. She said nothing for a long while, and then her hand gently took his, and their fingers interlocked.

Eventually he said, "I understand. Europe's the new Rwanda and Sudan, and, oh Christ, everywhere!" He looked at her and realised that her eyes were wet.

"We have a saying..." she started.

"Of course, of course, there will be a saying. I thought English had a lot of proverbs, but we're amateurs."

"*Chimbwi afwile intangalila*. The greedy hyena wants to eat everything but dies in the effort and eats nothing."

Across the stiff grass, in the orange evening light, children were playing football. The cicadas were starting to scrape their legs. Small birds pecked and flew and squabbled. A crowned eagle soared above the low hilltops as the sun descended ever faster towards the tree tops, polished by the thick air into brass and gold. Miriam tucked her legs up and the soles of her feet were a perfect match with the pink of the sunset on the high clouds.

During the brief few minutes of twilight he said, "You asked me to do some thinking about the relationship between gravity and quantum vacuum foam, which, of course, there can't be, according to theory. I suspect that was what you meant by *specifically*."

The kids picked up their football and ran off shouting towards the lights that were coming on here and there on the *stoeps* of the low houses across the fields.

"How long do I have to wait for a *but*?" she asked. He was suddenly aware of her hand on his arm.

"But," he said. "It's a big *but*! Well – actually it's a Planck-level *but*. At the point where the relativistic equations start to become doubtful, there might, just might, be a few little holes and loops in the *chikwembe* of space-time."

She pulled her hand away and spoke quickly in ChiBemba at her silver bracelet. He heard a deep voice responding, and then she stood up.

"Come," she said. "The Chief's invited us for supper."

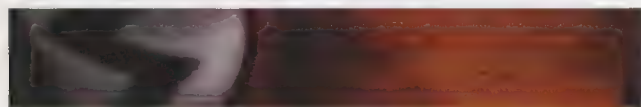
The last light of the sun snuffed itself out as the terminator rushed across the Congo River, and over Angola towards the Atlantic. An invisible hand threw a billion stars across the sky and went back for more.

She stomped her foot down. "Remember not to walk so lightly," she said. "You keep forgetting the way snakes hear through the ground. Stay away from the bushes where puff adders could be hiding. Don't walk under trees at night in case a boomslang is waiting to fall on you. Lift the lavatory seat before you sit down because the bite of a hunting spider is an unfortunate thing for the testicles, so they tell me. Shake out your shoes before you put them on because the scorpion likes nothing better than to curl up in them. Remember that it's said, maybe wrongly, but as a warning, that a mamba can slide after you as fast as a horse, and its strike is incurable and its neuro-poison agonising."

"Health and Safety's got to be a booming industry here," he said.

"That's why we have proverbs, Jason. Your castles and fine walls rise and fall. Words have served for us. But then you know very well that most physics is proverbs. All the same – we really don't want the possibility of an insight into quantum gravity squashed by a million year old venom designed to kill frogs, do we?"

A cloud of moths and other flying things surrounded each light on the path in a moving beating dodging darting halo. The air temperature dropped from nicely warm to nicely cool.



All this and more passed through his mind as he sat naked in the bone-shaped flyer as it followed the road down to Lake Tanganyika. Halfway down the steep hill Stephen Makonde, the laid-back pilot with a clutch of PhDs, veered off the track and settled the flyer in a patch of sugar cane. He climbed out with a machete and came back lopping the tops off two sticks. He handed them to Jason.

"You may need this," he said, "and this." He reached under the seat and produced a spear with a fire-blackened tip.

"Any other advice?" Jason asked.

"Try not to die," Makonde laughed. "Warriors have done this for thousands of years, but they haven't all made it to the top."

"Thanks."

The flyer lifted off again and they flew over the little port of Mpulugu. Night was falling and the fishermen were testing the brilliant lights on their boats as they sailed out into the gathering darkness of the lake.

He stood alone at the mouth of the valley amongst the tumbled rocks. Makonde's flyer was a bone-shaped blackness moving across the vast bright swathe of the Milky Way and then was gone.

Strategy is a wonderful thing. He'd worked it all out in advance. Unfortunately, strategy is a child of daylight reason, and starts to fray at the edges when you're surrounded by shadows, starlight, and the coughing and barking of the unseen and unforgiving biology that surrounds you.

Strategy dictated that sitting under a rock shelf would be as dangerous as trying to climb a steep valley in the darkness. He walked back down the valley and sat near the edge of the lake, spear in one hand and sharp stone in the other, and waited for the sun or the crocodiles, whichever came first. Strangely, though, he wasn't afraid. Not even when he heard a quiet splash.



At 6:05 the sun launched itself over the hills and started to cut through the mist on the lake. He was going to burn badly. He crouched down by the water's edge and plastered himself with grey mud. *Shouldn't have had your hair cut short, stupid*, he thought. *That's what it's for*. He chewed on some sugar cane and tried to ignore his thirst.

The Kalambo valley was a few hundred yards wide here where it joined the lake, and the going was easy for half a mile across gently shelving sheets of light grey rock. Then the forest closed in around the zigzagging river bed and the boulders blocking the way were bigger. His bare feet were sore already. The cracks and crevices in the rocks chewed at what tough skin he had. The mud was already baked dry on his skin and itching. The flies liked him and camped on his back and he had to keep flicking his hand in front of his face.

He was walking on the eastern side of the valley on a shelf that now had a thirty feet sheer drop to his left. And there it was: a yard of emerald green mamba, coiling and uncoiling in front of him. He had no boots, no thick trousers. If the mamba struck him in the leg he'd live for about five painful minutes. If it struck on his chest his heart would stop in a few seconds. He froze.

High above, a marabou stork adjusted its huge wings and dipped slightly to allow the camera a better view. In her cool office five miles away and a thousand feet down in the nuclear-hardened depths of ZIAP Miriam found herself unexpectedly sweating as she watched the pictures from the seven bird-shaped drones that circled over the valley. She moved her finger over the screen from the marabou's view and a targeting cross-hair appeared. She was lining the attack laser up on the mamba when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

Director Nskoshi Mulenga was wearing a beautifully-tailored

sand-coloured suit that looked expensively tasteful and a red and blue tie that didn't. "Don't kill the snake," he said. "Give him back his faculties. He is a man, not a refugee."

"But if we lose quantum gravity...?" she said.

He reached over her and touched an icon. The display changed to a panel of virtual sliders, like a mixing desk in an old-fashioned recording studio, and under each slider an image and a hint. His finger touched the square knob of a slider and pushed it from minimum to maximum. The word FEAR drifted across the screen and vanished. He reached for the knob labelled LOVE and she smacked his hand away.

Chief Mulenga squeezed her shoulder and walked towards the door. "Don't settle for half a man just because you can," he said as the door closed.

"Eya, baChiti," she said under her breath. *Yes, Chief!*

What seemed like an electric shock ran up Jason's arm from his wrist band and jolted his spine. The mamba weaved left and right uncertainly, something threatening between it and its young. It became more *solid* in his eyes. It became a focused streak of death and beauty. He felt a terrible knowledge of things that were not on smart boards or papers or cinemas or even memory. This snake was utterly *now*.

Very slowly he slid his feet backwards. He retreated ten feet or so and then slowly reached up to the nearest tree and snapped off a dead branch. Very carefully he stripped twigs off until he had a staff as long as he was tall. He gripped it like a cricket bat, or baseball bat, or maybe a club somebody's ancestors had held here long ago.

Stephen Makonde's voice whispered from his wrist into his ear. "As your companion, I am allowed to give you one assist. Do you want it now?"

Jason whispered back, "How many snakes in this valley?"

"Probably a thousand, maybe two thousand. Jason, I can pick you up now. You don't have to do this. You have our respect already."

"Forget it. My Chief, His Britannic Majesty, is dead and I need a new one. We made refugees pass an exam in Englishness. I decided to try this very old exam because it's the nearest I can get to being a Bemba. I'll take the assist."

"There's a proverb that says –"

"Fuck the proverb, Stephen. Tell me what I need to know."

"If you aim for the head you will probably miss. A blow to the spine is a good start, but not infallible. The snake moves very slowly until it strikes. Be the snake."

Jason moved the branch to the side, trying to get some idea of range. He stepped an inch at a time forward until he was within about six feet of the side to side moving triangle of the mamba's head, holding his breath. Very slowly he raised the branch above his head, took aim, and unleashed all his strength in a blow to the mamba's back. The snake was paralysed. Maybe. Jason smashed at the head until it was a splatter on the rock. He scooped the body over the edge of the rock with the branch and it fell with a dull splash into the muddy pool below.

"Thanks, Stephen," he whispered.

"Pleasure. What I didn't tell was that very few people can do that. Bet you never knew you were a snake killer, Professor Johns. Put it on the CV"

A dozen snakes later, a few painful slips, with the mud crack-

ing off his skin, leaving it exposed, he was several miles up the valley and rounding the bend that led to the falls. It was narrower here, the sides of the cleft closing in, the rocky sides higher, the jumbled rocks bigger. The sun was high overhead and the contrast between light and shadows impossible for the eyes.

Far away, on the other side of the river bed, he saw a flicker of movement. Two patches of tawny light appeared and then vanished. He sat very still and watched, in turn watched by the watching pair of leopards. Every minute the pattern moved. Towards him.

Overhead real and fictitious marabou circled.

Lions kill only when they're hungry. Leopards enjoy killing. *Yeah, you told me that. Great.*

There was a small but intent crowd standing behind Miriam's chair. Two of the monitors showed close-ups of the leopard. Their noses were raised, nostrils wide, as they grabbed any scent they could catch on the air currents. Their eyes were grey and squeezed half-closed to get the maximum depth of field on their prey. But still they waited. Cat waiting. Slow, patient, killer stillness.

"It is not fair," said a woman's voice behind Miriam.

"Why?" Miriam snapped. "I am told I cannot intervene. He chose it."

"No man has ever done this without the water." Many voices agreed.

Miriam lifted her bracelet and spoke urgently to it. Far above at ground level klaxons wailed and children hurried up the dry banks of the river. In the deep cisterns powerful pumps spun up and pipes filled with water that had once lapped the shores of India. The Kalambo began to flow, slowly at first, and then in full rainy season flood. Down through the village it ran, past the houses and research buildings and football pitches, until it came to the lip of the falls and flung itself over.

Jason heard a sudden roaring sound from above and then a plume of water jetted from high above him in a perfect unbroken fall to the dark green ancient pool below the cliffs. The leopards padded slowly towards him. He could see their markings clearly now. He could see the male flick his tongue around his lips and shake the flies away from his head.

Jason backed up against a rock face and tried to wipe the sweat from his hands on some grass. He held the spear in his left hand and the stone axe-head in his right.

The leopard crouched at the far side of the river bed and prepared to attack. Its thigh muscles flexed. As it launched, Jason threw the stone axe. He missed, but the leopard was distracted for a moment. That was when the boiling, foaming wall of water swept down the gorge, carrying stones, branches and leopard with it. Spray launched up and drenched him. He watched the animal carried downstream for a while and then it reached the side of the river, climbed out and shook itself. The female padded slowly down towards her mate. The pair stood and looked back at the figure standing on the rock, naked, holding a sharpened stick. They turned, and walked away down the valley towards the lake.

He had to strain his head back to look up to the top of the impossibly high column of water that was like a shimmering skyscraper standing in a roaring pool of green and silver foam. It was a thing of beauty and terror. And the people a thousand feet

above him could turn it off and turn it on again at their will.

He found the best crossing point after a lot of indecision. Was this shallower or faster? Did this have better hand holds? The river ran from the pool at the base of the waterfall through a jumble of rocks. It was fast. It was powerful. But he had to get across the river. His legs were trembling with muscle spasms, and he still had a thousand foot climb to the escarpment.

He touched his wrist band and said, "The water was great. Thanks. Can you turn it off again?"

Silence. He looked at the wrist band. There was something he hadn't seen before about it; it was *inert* in some way. It was, he realised, *switched off*.

He climbed down at his chosen point to where there was a four foot gap between two rocks with a cascade driving through. He put his hands into the water and drank deeply. Then he held the spear shaft across the rocks, lowered himself into the rushing flood and fought his way across until he could drag himself out and lie exhausted on the bank, looking up at the falling water. He was all body. His mind was elsewhere – up with the marabou, or somewhere behind him amongst the abandoned husks of chewed sugar cane. The pool at the bottom of the falls was wreathed in spray but had a dangerous aura. Tradition said that twins were thrown over here, and babies whose top teeth came out first, and upstarts who annoyed the chiefs. A flicker of intellect said that it would be an interesting archaeological dive, but the Bemba, now holders of the deepest secrets of the universe, would protect the bones of their ancestors with a fury of fundamental plasma fire.

From below the scree slope looked like a near-vertical five hundred feet high disaster waiting to happen. The rocks were anything from a few inches to a foot wide and very eager to fall down. His feet were bleeding. When he climbed on a lump of rock it would either be firm or shoot off down the hill, causing a chain-reaction that could reach the rocks above him and put him into their target zone. It took him two hours to reach the trees, and even they were sticking out from a steep hillside. He was covered in bruises from flinging himself out of the way of falling rocks.

It was cooler amongst the trees. He pulled himself up from branch to branch and trunk to trunk, slithering back sometimes on the grass and digging his fingers in. And then he really fell, turning over and scouring bleeding trenches in his back. The flies came in squadrons to feast. His arms were wrecked. It was so far, so far up, and he was becoming impossibly heavy.

It was late in the afternoon when he crawled on all fours over the crown of the hill and looked down at the lip of Kalambo Falls and the valley curving away to the distant lake. It was then that he heard the cough and spun painfully around.

The hyenas were spaced out amongst the trees, in perfect tactical formation. He had nothing. His spear was in the river, along with his axe-head. He'd come so far, he'd climbed up Kalambo, and it seemed unjust that he'd finally be taken down by these evil snouts and bodies with mismatched front and back legs. He pulled himself up into the nearest tree, six feet, eight feet high. The hyenas watched and waited expectantly. Saliva dripped from their muzzles.

And then he uttered the most heart-felt primal scream, a scream that launched from the solar-plexus, a scream that

echoed around the hills, and leapt towards the nearest hyena, screaming and screaming with rage and hatred, screaming the word *chimbwi* over and over again.

The hyenas turned and ran.

The man with the girl's name walked out of the trees, with six soldiers carrying Kalashnikovs. He beckoned. Jason shook his head slowly. It was a quarter of a mile downhill to the river.

"You are in Tanzania, now," Arisa said. "They have no jurisdiction here. I hope you will come willingly. But you will come. You will be well-looked after. We may even give you back to the Zambians when we have what we need from you."

"I have nothing you could want," said Jason. "So, I'll say good-bye."

Arisa was wrapped in a Masai cloth. He raised his long walking stick and pointed. The soldiers moved forwards.

Four marabous banked their eight foot wingspan and dived. They spat plasma and the trees around Arisa and his men exploded into flame.

The white-skinned, bleeding, exhausted warrior turned his back on them and walked down the steep slope towards the lip of the falls.



Miriam was standing at the other side of the Kalambo. The river was fast but shallow here on the lip of the falls. Shallow, but slippery on the rocks, and eight hundred feet is too long a drop to survive. Jason looked upstream for a safer crossing, then shook his head, and stepped into the water just an arm's length from the edge. The river was flowing fast. He had no strength. His foot slipped and he stumbled, reaching under water to grab a split in the rock. He was inches from the gulf. She waded into the water, coming to help him, but he shouted "No!" and she stood still. Slowly he moved away from the lip of the falls and groped his way across the river.

Miriam said nothing. She took his hand and touched a small rod to his refugee bracelet. It sprang open, and she caught it and handed to him. He felt a waterfall of emotion sweep through him. Things held back rushed into every part of him. He stood, naked and bleeding, at the lip of the falls and threw the bracelet out into the air and watched it fall into the spray below. He stood and so profoundly wanted to jump.

"They weren't stupid, were they, my people?" Miriam asked.

"No," he said, "not at all."

"So?"

"Gravity is god. I get it. I really do. All that's left of me gets it."

She splashed him with the cool water until he was clean and rubbed a balm into his lacerated back.

They walked up the gravel path to the open area where the tourist buses usually stopped. On the way she handed him a sheet of cloth and helped him wrap it around himself. In the car park more than a hundred men, women and children went down on one knee and said, as though with a single voice, "*Mwapoleni baChitikela*. Greetings, Little Chief."

A fat blue pig flew in from the north and landed behind the crowd, who laughed and clapped. "That's yours, baby. And by the

way, you're not *the* chief, but you're the only theoretical physicist ever to do the warrior's climb, so you're a chief for today," Miriam said. There was a pot sitting over a charcoal stove. Jason accepted a length of plastic tube from Chief Mulenga, who was mostly known as the Director of the research institute, pushed it down through the steaming scum on the surface, and sucked long and hard on the hot honey beer. A young girl came up and shyly presented him with a pair of very good shoes. A boy brought him a garland of flame lilies.

Jason turned to Chief Mulenga, and said, "I'd like to meet the last one who did the climb."

Mulenga smiled. "That's a bit difficult," he said. "To the best of our knowledge, nobody's done it for a couple of hundred years."

They stood, waiting for his speech. It was very brief.

He pointed to his legs and said, "A white man knows he is at home in Africa when he wears shorts every day and grows hair on his knees."

Then the drumming started. Multicoloured laser beams flashed across the valley and intersected. Each intersection caused a crack or boom of sound, deep, sharp, a deafening cascade of pulsating cross-rhythms that sent the storks into ecstatic loopings of the loop and cobra to shift their heads to the beat and even *chimbwi* the hyena danced on his shrunken back legs, and far downstream on the banks of the flowing Kalambo two leopards twined together amongst the trees and danced and the whole valley flashed with rainbow light and sang, each to his own, including the humans, the ancient songs of life.

His head was dizzy with the honey beer as she led him up a path he'd never seen, to a *rondavel*. The walls weren't made of mud, the thatched roof wasn't made of reeds, and the window gaps

had little force fields to keep out the insects and let in the breeze. But it looked like a hut. The moon was a fat fish struggling to get out of the bright net of the Milky Way.

She caught hold of his hand and touched his fingertip to the sensor by the door. It swung back, and the interior lights came on, low and warm. "Your new house," she said. "Feel entirely free to change the decorations."

They went in. The door closed softly behind them.

The bed was wide and covered with golden sheep skin. "I just thought that every Jason should have his fleece."

He laughed, and they laughed together, and then they stood close but awkward.

After a while she said, "I think I read somewhere that you are an expert on Knot Theory."

He shrugged modestly.

"Can you help me with this?" she asked, pointing to knot that tied her *chikwembe* around her. And so Jason untied the knot and they fell together onto the Golden Fleece, and made love until the moon had long escaped and the sun was getting ready to shine his hot embarrassed face on Africa.

In the dawn light they were tangled up in the sheep skin and her leg was across his hips.

Her eyes opened, and suddenly flooded with tears. "We have a terrible thing to ask, baby warrior," she said.

He kissed her nose and asked, "What's that?"

There was a long pause, and then she said, "We need you to go back to Europe."

In the far distance *chimbwi*, the hyena, laughed and the world and the sun stopped. Down at the edge of Lake Tanganyika lay the bodies of two crocodiles, each drilled neatly through by a laser beam. But Miriam wasn't going to tell Jason that, and the crocodiles couldn't.



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1870-1875

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1885-1890

Anita Schleif: *Have you thought about what you'll do if you're not passed fit to take part in the mission? There have been media reports of how difficult it is for discharged fliers to be accepted back into society, of how women fliers especially have been treated as pariahs. How does it make you feel as a woman, knowing that the Kushnev drain will make you permanently infertile?*

Rachel Alvin: *I don't ever think about failure. I don't see the point. I want to put all my efforts into succeeding. As for becoming infertile, it's a decision you take, like any other, like having children or not having them. Life is all about making choices, and in making one choice you inevitably close the door on another. Fliers find it hard to fit in because being a flier is a vocation. Anyone who chooses to follow a vocation finds ordinary life difficult and mystifying, whether they're an artist or a missionary or a mathematician. The Kushnev drain is only a part of it. Mainly it's a question of focus, of intense focus on only one thing.*

From the transcript of *Shooting the Albatross: The Women of the Aurora Space Program*, a film by Anita Schleif

NINA ALLAN Flying in the Face of God

The outward effects of the Kushnev drain were many and varied; with Rachel it had exaggerated her freckles. They looked darker than before and slightly inflamed, standing out on her face like divots of rust. It was hot in the carriage, and Rachel's brackish, slightly acrid body odour was particularly noticeable. Anita watched the man in the opposite seat wipe sweat from his upper lip with the back of his hand then hoist his briefcase onto his knees and take out *The Times*. She saw him staring at Rachel over his newspaper, the way civilians always did with fliers, especially the women. Two stops down the line he left the train, leaving Anita and Rachel with the carriage to themselves.

Rachel stood up and tried to open the window but the sealing-catch, with its rusted-down hasps, proved too much for her. It was an antiquated design, something Anita remembered from her school days. She was surprised to see it. She had thought all the old-style compartment trains had been decommissioned years ago.

She got to her feet and opened the window, releasing the sticky catch with the heel of her hand. Warm air rushed in, filling the carriage with the smell of dried grass.

"You mustn't put your muscles under strain," said Anita. "Remember what the doctors have said."

"I just feel so useless. I can hardly do anything now."

"The things you can do are different, that's all. You know that better than anyone. Stop giving yourself a hard time."

Rachel turned to face the window. Her thinning hair blew back a little from her face. Anita wondered if Rachel would be allowed to keep what remained of her hair, or whether it would have to be shaved off, or whether it would fall out soon anyway. She thought of asking for the sake of the film, then realised she didn't want to know. When compared with other aspects of the process it was a small matter. But she had always loved Rachel's red hair.

"I went to the supermarket with Serge last night," said Rachel suddenly. "Just after you left. I wanted to help him stock up. It was no good though, it was all too much. I had to go and sit in the car. It's hard to explain, it's like you're drowning in colour and noise. The sight of all that food makes me feel ill." She paused. "We tried to make love but it was hopeless. When he tried to go inside me it hurt so much I had to tell him to stop. They gave us this special lubricant but it's useless, at least it was for me. Serge told me it didn't matter and I made it all right for him of course but I could tell how upset he was. He was ages getting to sleep." She turned back towards Anita. Her eyes, once dark blue, were now a faded turquoise, opaque as chalk. "Will you go and see him once I've gone? I know he likes talking to you."

Anita nodded. "Of course I will." She wondered if this was some covert way of Rachel giving her permission to sleep with Serge, to take him over, perhaps. She knew it would be tempting for both of them, but she must not allow it to happen. She loved Serge, but as a brother. To try and alter things could be disastrous. They would do better to behave as they always did, by going to films together and cooking curries and talking about Rachel. In the end Serge would meet someone else and that would be painful but at least their friendship would still be intact.

In the last six months, both during Rachel's leave and immediately before, Anita had tried to concentrate all her energies on the film she was making about the women fliers. The idea for

the film had arisen directly out of her early conversations with Rachel and she had begun the project almost without realising it. In many ways she still felt uneasy about it. She didn't like the idea that people might see the work as in some way connected with her own life, as a comment on the death of her mother. She found such notions intrusive and unwelcome. But now she had started work it was impossible for her to draw back. She even supposed that at some level people would be right to assume that the film had a personal context, although its subject was not her mother of course but Rachel.

Rachel was now producing less than ten millilitres of urine a day. Her skin had increased in thickness and had lost most of its elasticity. She was eating next to nothing and sleeping little. The sleep she had would be feverish and noisy with dreams.

Anita's researches had made her an expert on the Kushnev process. Rachel had pulled a few strings and she had been allowed in to see Clement Anderson, the team doctor. He refused her request to film him, but he had agreed to a taped interview, and she had been allowed to shoot a few brief sequences around the base. There was some footage of the fliers in the team canteen that she knew would come across very well.

"The drain triggers a permanent change in the way cells grow," Anderson had told her. "Crudely put it's a form of cancer." He had given her a folder of printed material and a DVD of Valery Kushnev explaining his theories. Kushnev's accent was so strong they'd had to include subtitles. The Kushnev process derived from cockroaches. Cockroaches, Kushnev explained, were the hardiest of species. They could endure the harshest of conditions and subsist on next to nothing. If necessary they could shut down most of their functions, regressing to a state of suspended animation until an improvement in external circumstances allowed them to continue with their lives.

"During the journey itself our fliers will exist in a half-life," said Valery Kushnev on the video. "A kind of para-existence, in which there is full intellectual function but without the accompanying stress of biological need. In this way we cross the emptiness of space. Our fliers are the new pioneers. In a very real sense they are following in the footsteps of Columbus."

At this point he chuckled, showing teeth that were eroded and stained with nicotine. Anita had watched the film more than a dozen times.

"How's Meredith?" said Rachel. "Did you call her last night?"

Anita started in her seat. For a moment she had almost forgotten where she was.

"She's fine," said Anita. "She asked after you." It was becoming increasingly difficult to talk to her grandmother on the phone. They had unlimited free calls at Southwater House, but she refused to have the webcam on and disembodied voices seemed only to confuse her more.

"How is that friend of yours?" she had said. "Are you bringing her down to see me?"

"You mean Rachel, Gran," said Anita. "Her name is Rachel. We came down to see you last week."

Her grandmother's short-term memory was becoming increasingly erratic but on some days Meredith Sheener was as sharp as ever, keen to read the newspapers at breakfast time as she had always done and even able to complete a small section of the crossword puzzle. She was still a demon at cards. Anita

had tried talking to the visiting consultant about this, asking him if the card playing might help to stimulate other areas of her brain, but he brushed her words aside, shaking his head as though she had asked him if her grandmother might perhaps one day take up deep-sea diving or decide to learn a second language.

"Oh, they all have something," he said. "With some it's cards or backgammon, with others it's a photographic memory for Shakespeare. It doesn't mean anything. An old person's brain is like a cap-sized steam freighter: you'll find pockets of air here and there but the ship is going to sink in the end. Nothing to set much store by, I'm afraid."

Anita remembered the look on his face, the tight, harassed expression of a man with too many demands on his time. He was tall, grey, and gaunt, his fingers slightly twisted from arthritis.

"He's a good-looking man, that doctor, don't you think?" This was something her grandmother said every time Anita visited. Anita knew she fretted about her not being settled with anyone. She wished she could reassure her in some way, explain how her love for Rachel sustained her as much as it caused her pain. She touched the pendant around her neck, feeling its bumpy contours through the thin green material of her blouse. It was something she often did at times of stress or uncertainty. The pendant seemed to act as a lodestone, bringing her back in touch with who she was.

It hung on a silver chain, a small, finely-worked figurine in the form of a dodo. Her grandmother had once taken her to see the dodo skeleton on display at the Natural History Museum. Anita had gazed at it with intense curiosity, almost with reverence.

"Why are there no real dodos?" she asked. She had been about eight at the time.

"The dodo forgot how to fly," said her grandmother. "It lived on the island of Mauritius, right in the middle of the Indian Ocean. There were no people there, and no other big animals either, so it was perfectly safe. It didn't really need its wings at all. But when hunters finally came to the island the dodo couldn't get away from them. They were shot and killed in their thousands. In less than a hundred years they were extinct."

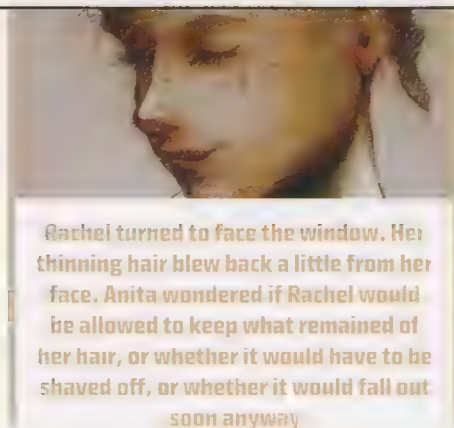
Anita thought it was terribly sad. She felt a huge anger towards the hunters, with their ridiculous feathered hats and their carefully-oiled fowling pieces. Later, when they got home, her grandmother had shown her Mauritius on the map.

"It was like a paradise island when sailors first discovered it," she said. "So much of the world was still unknown then. Imagine how it must have felt, to set foot in a place that no one had ever seen before."

As a child she was allowed to wear the pendant occasionally as a treat, but when Anita turned sixteen her grandmother gave her the silver dodo and told her it was hers to keep.

"It belonged to your mother," she said. "She wore it until the day before she died."

When they got to Charing Cross they had a minor argument.



Rachel turned to face the window. Her thinning hair blew back a little from her face. Anita wondered if Rachel would be allowed to keep what remained of her hair, or whether it would have to be shaved off, or whether it would fall out soon anyway

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Anita wanted to go with Rachel all the way out to Northolt but Rachel insisted on continuing with the journey by herself.

"How are you going to manage?" said Anita. "What about your luggage?"

Rachel couldn't carry anything heavy because her bones were still at the brittle stage. There was also the question of safety. There had been a couple of attacks on fliers in recent months, supposedly by tube gangs, although on all but one occasion the incidents had happened at night.

"I've only got one suitcase," said Rachel. "Nothing is going to happen." She laid her hand on Anita's arm, her fingers brownish, a bunch of dry twigs. "I need some time to get adjusted. If you follow me right to the wire I'll blub like a girl."

Anita tried to laugh. She remembered another conversation they had had, the argument that had erupted between them on the morning Rachel received her commission.

"It's too late for this, don't you see that?" Rachel had screamed at her. "It's been too late from the day I had the first course of injections. Don't you think I could do with some support? Has it ever occurred to you I might be scared, too?"

In the end Anita went with her as far as the Underground. They went to a café just off Leicester Square. From the outside it looked coolly inviting, but there was something wrong with the air conditioning and Anita's neck and armpits were soon streaming with sweat. Rachel of course hardly registered temperature changes any more. She wet her lips with small sips of mineral water while Anita drank a glass of orange juice, feeling it slip down her throat in freezing gouts. At the end of twenty minutes Rachel called for the bill and then stood up to go.

"It's time," she said. "The longer we put it off the worse it will be." She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed at her eyes, although Anita was sure this was just out of habit; Rachel's tear ducts had dried up some time ago.

Once they were outside on the street Anita turned and took her in her arms.

"I love you," she said. "I love you so much."

"I know," said Rachel. "I know you do."

They went down the escalators to the Piccadilly Line. A youth with tattooed black mambas encircling both forearms helped Rachel onto the train.

"Going up soon then, are you?" he said. "I think you're the business." He steered her gently, almost tenderly towards a seat. The train doors slid closed. Anita raised her hand, meaning to wave, but Rachel's face was angled away from her, talking to the boy with the snake tattoos. As Anita watched he threw his head back, his green eyes crinkled closed in a soundless laugh.

Once Anita was back at Charing Cross she telephoned Serge. He sounded distant and preoccupied and for the first time it occurred to Anita that he might have started seeing someone else. Anita had never talked to Rachel directly about Serge. She had taken his continued presence as proof of his devotion. It

was something she admired, something that softened the worst pangs of her jealousy. Now she wondered if she had simply been blind.

"I won't be at home for a while," she said to him. "I'm going down to visit my grandmother. I'll probably be away for a couple of days."

She didn't know why she was telling him this. The decision to go and see her grandmother had come upon her spontaneously, almost while she was having the conversation. She pressed the phone hard to her ear, trying to catch every nuance, any suspicious change in his tone of voice.

"I'll see you in a couple of days then," he said. "Are you OK, Anita? Are you sure you wouldn't like to come round?"

"I'm fine," she said. Quite suddenly he was the last person she wanted near her. "I'll come and see you as soon as I get back."

She changed trains at London Bridge and then again at East Croydon. The fields either side of the tracks were yellow and cracked. There had been no rain to speak of since April. Drought-summers were common now and were said to be becoming more common, though Anita remembered them even from her childhood, the standpipes in the streets, the 'dry hours' between eleven and four. One of her friends from school then, Rowland Parker, had once gone six whole months without washing.

"It's my patriotic duty," he said. His friends egged him on, placing bets on how long he could hold out. He stank like a muskrat, but the skin beneath his clothes had been smooth and clean. His smell had attracted her: feral and vital and somehow other. Anita remembered touching his penis, its immediate and startling response.

It had been Rowland Parker who had first told her about her mother.

"Your mum died in that fire, didn't she?" he said. "That explosion on board the rocket. There's stuff about her on the Internet. My brother told me."

They had been sitting out by the Old Pond, side by side on the concrete platform that people had once used to dive from into the lake. There was no water now, of course, just a foot or so sometimes in winter. In summer the lake was a dense mass of greenery, of hogweed and bramble and dead nettle mostly, but other things too, poppies and foxgloves, plants that didn't grow much anywhere else. Her grandmother said it was because the soil under the Old Pond always stayed slightly damp. The concrete was burning hot beneath the soles of her feet. She squinted through her lashes at the three o'clock sun.

"My mother died in an air crash," she said. It was what she had always been told.

"Oh," said Rowland Parker. "Sorry. My brother must have got it wrong." He glanced at her sideways then looked down at his hands. His feet were dangling over the rim of the dried up lake. She thought he had beautiful feet, long and narrow, like a gipsy boy's. He had three large mosquito bites just above his ankle bone. They formed an almost-straight line, three pinky-red full stops.

"It doesn't matter," said Anita. "I never knew her. I was a baby when she died. I don't remember anything about her."

She didn't know what to think, and this, at nine years old, was her first real experience of uncertainty. If what Rowland

said was true then what she had been told before was not true, or at least not the whole truth. The world, previously a place of straight lines and lighted spaces, became suddenly darker and full of crooked shadows. When she got home that evening she found herself looking at her grandmother, studying her almost, and wondering *who exactly she was*. Meredith Sheener, a young woman still at only fifty, her thick hair piled high on top of her head. Was Meredith her grandmother at all, or some impostor sent to lie to her? The idea was frightening but Anita could not deny there was also an element of excitement to it. She ate her supper in silence, thinking hard. She wondered what would happen if she forgot how to speak, just as the dodo had forgotten how to fly. She wondered what it would be like to spend the rest of her life as a mute.

They had a mute at school, Leonie Coffin, though she was teased more for her name than for her silence.

It was her grandmother who spoke first.

"Are you all right, my darling? Did something bad happen today?"

She was briefly tempted to say nothing, because that would be more enigmatic and more in keeping with the seriousness of the situation but in the end the directness of her grandmother's question made her unable to resist answering it.

"Rowland said mum died on a rocket. Is that true?"

Meredith Sheener had answered at once and without prevarication. It was that, more than anything else, that persuaded Anita that Meredith was telling the truth. She said that Anita's mother Melanie had died on board a rocket called the *Aurora One*. The rocket had been sabotaged, and exploded on take-off. Everyone on board had been killed instantly, and several ground staff had died in the fire that destroyed the launch site. Anita's father had been one of them.

"The papers wouldn't leave us alone," said Meredith. "It was terrible for everyone, of course, but it was Melanie they were most interested in because she was the only woman."

"But who would want to blow up a rocket when they knew there were people inside?" In spite of her determination to be detached and grown up about it Anita could feel her heart clench in her chest.

"People who are no good at all," said her grandmother. She sighed and bowed her head, rubbing at her eyes with the back of her hand. "There were some people who thought it was bad to send human beings into space. They complained about the money it cost, and said it should be spent on feeding poor people and building schools and hospitals and churches here on Earth. But that wasn't the main thing. Mostly they thought that human beings shouldn't get above themselves, that if people were meant to fly they would have been born with wings. A blasphemy, they called it, flying in the face of God. They called themselves the Guardian Angels, but what they actually did was kill people."

Anita fell silent again. The feelings inside her jostled for attention. It was exciting that her mother had been a space woman. It was also exciting, in a way that she would not have admitted to anyone except perhaps Rowland Parker, that her mother had been someone important enough for people to want to kill. It was exciting but it was also terrifying. She felt suddenly exposed, as if her life too might be in danger.

She wondered if it were possible to feel grief for someone she did not remember, who was connected to her by fact but not by actuality.

She asked her grandmother if she could have a photograph of her mother to keep in her room. She had seen photographs of course, plenty of them, images that had become so familiar they seemed to her now like film stills, pictures that made her mother common property, like an actress or a politician. She thought that owning one of these photographs might make her mother seem more real. Meredith Sheener went into her bedroom and a little while later came back with a red cardboard wallet. It contained two photographs, a duplicate of the one of her mother graduating from Oxford that her grandmother kept on her dressing table and another, previously unknown to her, showing Melanie in a checked shirt with a baby in her arms.

"That's you at eight weeks old," said her grandmother. "It's the only picture I have of the two of you together."

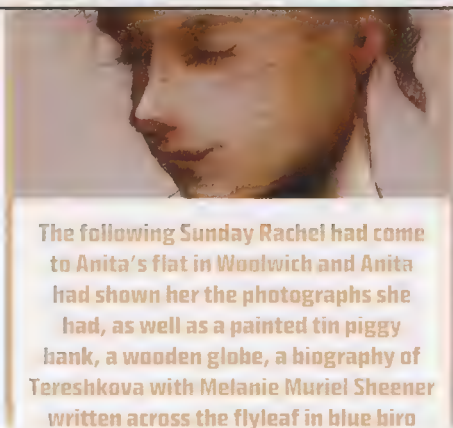
Anita's throat felt tight and closed, as if a large weight was pressing down on her windpipe. When she asked tentatively if there were any photographs of her father her grandmother shook her head.

"I'm sorry dear, but I just don't have any. I hardly knew Malcolm really. They had only been married six weeks."

AS: *Can you tell me something about how you got involved in the space program? You already had a good career as an industrial chemist, a lot of respect from your colleagues, plenty to look forward to. Some people would say you've sacrificed your humanity for the sake of the Aurora project. What made you want to do this in the first place?*

RA: *This is something I remember quite clearly. When I was eleven years old I saw a film called Voyage to the Sun, which wasn't about space travel at all but about the first sea transits to America and the West Indies. I'd learned these things at school of course, but seeing the film made everything seem more real. I'd never been more excited by anything in my life. What excited me most was the idea that our world had once been dangerous, that huge areas of our planet were still unknown. The men who set off on those sea voyages didn't know where they were going, much less if they would ever return. They risked their lives for the sake of an adventure and the idea of that just thrilled me to the bone. Later on I started to read about the early space pioneers and all those thoughts and feelings came back to me. I suppose they'd never really gone away.*

Rachel Alvin had emailed Anita to say how much she had enjoyed Anita's short film *Moon Dogs*, based around a greyhound track in Hackney. They had corresponded for a while and then



The following Sunday Rachel had come to Anita's flat in Woolwich and Anita had shown her the photographs she had, as well as a painted tin piggy bank, a wooden globe, a biography of Tereshkova with Melanie Muriel Sheener written across the flyleaf in blue biro

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arranged to meet for lunch at an Italian restaurant in Soho. Anita was bowled over by Rachel. She was small and quietly spoken, her features too angular to be conventionally beautiful but there was something fearless about her, an audacity in her way of thinking that made her compelling. They seemed to form an immediate bond. It was not until later, when Rachel asked her if she was related to Melanie Schleif, that Anita realised it had not been her film that had drawn Rachel to her in the first instance but the simple fact of her surname.

"She was my mother," Anita said. "I was eight months old when she died."

"I don't believe it," said Rachel. "She's been a hero to me since I was small." She had gone quite pale, and her blue eyes filled up with tears. Anita felt a surge of jealousy and then repressed it immediately. Her mother was dead, after all. The important thing was not how she had met Rachel, but that they had met at all.

"I have some things of hers," she said. "I could show them to you, if you like."

The following Sunday Rachel had come to Anita's flat in Woolwich and Anita had shown her the photographs she had, as well as a painted tin piggy bank, a wooden globe, a biography of Tereshkova with *Melanie Muriel Sheener* written across the flyleaf in blue biro.

"My grandmother got rid of most of her stuff because she said it was too upsetting to keep it, that it was like having a ghost in the house," said Anita. "These few things are all that's left." Later in the afternoon they took the bus up to Shooter's Hill and Anita showed Rachel the house she had grown up in and where Melanie also had spent her childhood. It faced the main road, a large Victorian villa that had once been a school but had later been divided into flats. Anita had not been there since she and her grandmother had moved out eighteen months before. She saw that the outside had been repainted. It made the place seem different, newer, almost as if her time there had been erased.

"The house is enormous inside," she said. "There's a lane at the back that runs all the way to Oxleas Woods. There were foxgloves. I played there all the time when I was a child."

She would have liked to have shown Rachel the garden, but the side gate had been padlocked shut. It made her feel chagrined, angry almost, to be treated as an intruder in a place that had been her home for so long, even though she knew such feelings were illogical. She suddenly found herself wishing she had made more of an effort to buy the flat.

"I loved it here," she said. "It was somewhere I always felt safe."

The flat had been sold, and the money invested to pay the fees for her grandmother's retirement home. Because of its large size the apartment had been priced out of her range, although its tired condition meant that in the end it had gone to developers. Anita thought now that if she had fought harder she might have found a way to afford it. She looked at Rachel, taking pic-

tures with her phone and gazing about herself like a tourist at a world heritage site. She touched the dodo pendant through her dress and thought how curious it was that Rachel's presence had made it possible not only for her to return to the house but to feel nostalgia for it.

It was as if her growing feelings for Rachel had opened some special compartment in her mind. She wondered then why it was that she hadn't told her the whole truth about her mother's relics, that as well as the handful of harmless possessions she had shown her there were several cardboard boxes of letters, diaries and photographs, things she had found among her grandmother's papers and taken with her to her new flat in Woolwich.

She had never been through them properly. When she was a child she supposed she had hero-worshipped her mother, much the way that Rachel did now. But by the time she went away to college she had begun to feel an increasing need not to be defined by her.

Her grandmother's illness had changed that for a while but now what Anita wanted was to have her mother out of the way again. She wanted Rachel all to herself.

By the time the train reached Shoreham it was almost empty. Anita stepped down onto the platform, slamming the train door shut with a hollow bang. Sallow grass grew up between the paving slabs. The sun beat down. There was an acrid reek of seaweed and brine.

Rachel had loved this place. As a child she had rarely been out of London and so the idea of the seaside had never lost its enchantment. The first time Anita had taken Rachel to see Meredith Rachel had been on her second course of injections and her hand to eye coordination was all over the place. She had spilled a cup of tea into her lap, scalding herself quite badly. Meredith had taken over, dabbing Savlon on Rachel's burns and finding her a clean shirt to put on, an outlandish thing with a high lace collar and diamanté buttons.

"I don't understand it," Anita said afterwards, when they were on the train back to London. "The clothes she wore at home were always so dull."

"Perhaps she feels she's free now," said Rachel. "Free to be what she wants instead of what people expect."

Anita had found this idea comforting. She felt humbled by Rachel's generosity of spirit, her ability to accept people simply for who they were. She turned her back on the sea. The tide was far out, and there was nothing to see but mudflats. Southwater House was only half a mile from the station but it was a stiff uphill climb. She supposed the view from the top was part of what made the place appealing. The retirement home catered for about thirty full-time residents, and with its tiled hallways and sloping lawns it reminded her a little of one of the 1920s seaside hotels in the old-fashioned detective stories her grandmother had once enjoyed, novels by Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers. The staff seemed to connive in the illusion; Anita privately thought that some of them were more eccentric than most of the residents. There was something chaotic about the place, and it was precisely this that had convinced her that her grandmother would be happy there. The hallway smelled of pine detergent and fermenting grass clippings, a scent that invariably reminded her of the day Meredith had come here to

live. The dismantling of the Shooter's Hill flat had been very difficult for her and she had arrived at Southwater House tearful and disorientated. When Anita tried to kiss her goodbye she clung to her and called her Melanie. The next time Anita saw her grandmother she was different, but better. Anita wondered if Rachel was right, that Meredith was finally feeling the freedom to be herself.

The reception desk was unmanned. Anita hesitated, wondering if she should ring the bell or continue upstairs. Eventually someone appeared, a young woman with peroxide hair and glasses. She was wheeling a linen cart with one hand and clutching a sheaf of newspapers in the other. Anita thought she recognised her from a previous visit but couldn't remember her name.

"Miss Sheener," she said. "Your grandmother's in her room. She hasn't been feeling too bright today, I'm afraid."

Anita felt the usual surprise at being addressed by her grandmother's surname. It was as if in some sense she had become her grandmother. She didn't know if the staff here were ignorant of her actual surname or whether the woman had simply forgotten.

"What do you mean?" she said. "Why didn't you call me?"

The peroxide nurse took a step backwards. "There's nothing to worry about," she said. "She isn't ill or anything, just a bit down in the dumps."

Anita took this as a euphemism, that the woman was trying to tell her that Meredith was going through one of her confused periods. It had been less than a week since she had seen her but in Meredith Sheener's world Anita knew that time could be an unstable commodity. Five days might slip by without notice, or they might seem to pass as slowly as five years. She smiled vaguely at the nurse and then made her way quickly upstairs.

Meredith's room was on the first floor overlooking the sea. It was large and bright and full of things. There were things Anita remembered from Shooter's Hill of course, but there was also much that was new: china ornaments and embroidered cushion covers, brightly coloured alien objects that scrambled for possession of every surface. Like the ostentatious clothes, they seemed more a part of the new Meredith than the old one. Anita couldn't help noticing a certain accumulation of dust. She supposed it was impossible for the staff to keep pace with her grandmother's clutter.

Meredith was in the armchair beside the bed. Her eyes were open but there was a fixed, empty quality to her gaze that made her seem like a different person. Anita's breath caught in her throat.

"Are you all right, Gran?" she said. She knelt beside her grandmother's chair, taking both her hands in hers. Meredith's fingers gripped back tightly like an anxious child's.

"I want to talk to Rachel," she said. "There's something I need to tell her."

She seemed suddenly fully aware, as if a switch had been thrown inside her. Her eyes blazed with a furious life. It was as if she had grown younger by twenty years.

"Rachel isn't here, Gran," said Anita. "Her leave is finished. She'll be flying back to America next week. I told you this last night on the phone."

She felt full of a cold and desperate pity. She wondered if

this was how her grandmother had felt when she had to explain to Anita that her mother was dead. In a small corner of her mind she envied Meredith for being able to exist in a world where Rachel was still retrievable, where the possibility existed of her imminent return. She felt tears start at the back of her eyes. She bowed her head, hoping that her grandmother was now beyond noticing such things. She had heard that a large part of the illness was self-absorption, an inability to process events in the outside world. But Meredith wrested a hand free and grabbed at her, tilting her face towards her as she had used to do when Anita was a child.

"You look sad," she said. "Has something bad happened to Rachel?"

Anita gazed up at her, thinking as she had often thought how strange it was they looked so little alike. Anita's mother had been blonde and robust, taking after the Dutch sea captain, Claes Sheener, who had been her father, and from what she could tell from the photographs Anita was exactly like her. Meredith Sheener was a small, Celtic-looking woman with fine bones and heavy-lidded deep-set eyes. Her hair, once black, had begun to go grey shortly after Melanie died.

Anita felt her heart crushed by tenderness for her. She had always shown such fortitude. Even now in her helplessness she was busy thinking of others.

"No, Gran. Rachel's fine. If there's anything you want to say to her just you tell me. I can pass your message along next time she phones."

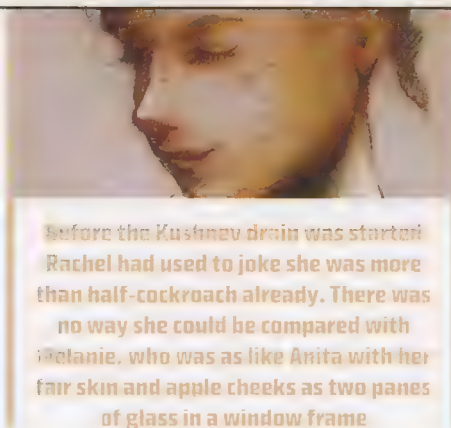
Meredith's grip relaxed and the fierceness went out of her eyes.

"Not to worry, my darling. I wanted to tell her she's just like Melanie, but it doesn't matter now that she's gone." She caressed Anita's hair, looking suddenly tired. Anita stared at her blankly. She thought of Rachel's gangling limbs, her flat chest and copper hair and freckled face. Before the Kushnev drain was started Rachel had used to joke she was more than half-cockroach already. There was no way she could be compared with Melanie, who was as like Anita with her fair skin and apple cheeks as two panes of glass in a window frame. And yet she supposed after all that it was true. Rachel and Melanie were both courageous women of action, both prepared to die for what they believed in. Whereas Anita had always been content just to stand and watch.

Her mother hadn't loved her enough to stay on Earth for her and neither had Rachel. Anita began to weep.

"It's all my fault, Gran," she said. "I should have found a way to stop her but I didn't know how. I love her so much. It's almost worse than if she were dead."

If Rachel were dead she would in some sense be safe, safe to be remembered and loved. As it was she lived on as a monster, dedicated to a life where personal feeling was nothing when set against her vocation, the mysterious inner voice that told her that her place was not here, but elsewhere. Somewhere so far away that it was impossible for the normal mind to conceive it.



Before the Kushnev drain was started Rachel had used to joke she was more than half-cockroach already. There was no way she could be compared with Melanie, who was as like Anita with her fair skin and apple cheeks as two panes of glass in a window frame

And yet in a hundred years from now, when Anita was dead and buried, would Rachel sometimes think of her, and remember the afternoon they had spent together on Shooter's Hill, the foxgloves bright as bunting in the overgrown grass?

She hugged her grandmother's knees and cried. She thought how furious the peroxide nurse would be if she came in and found her in such a state. She struggled to control her tears.

"I'm sorry, Gran," she said. "I didn't mean to upset you. I'm just tired."

Her grandmother was silent, her eyes fixed on some invisible horizon, her hands now lying still at her sides. Anita's heart lurched. For one impossible moment she wondered if her grandmother was dead, had died because of her crying, and for this too she would be to blame. Then at last her hands moved, rustling the stiff mauve silk of the skirt she was wearing. Anita got to her feet and stood over her anxiously. The dodo pendant swung free of her blouse. It hung in midair, twisting slowly at the end of its chain.

"Can I get you anything?" said Anita. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

Meredith Sheener looked up at her and smiled, creasing the delicate skin at the corners of her eyes. Then she reached out for the pendant, grabbing at it like a small child trying to catch a butterfly. She batted it with her fingers, making it dance and shudder, the closest it would ever get to natural flight.

"I blamed myself for years over Melanie," she said. "We had such a terrible row the day before she left. You were so tiny still, and I told her she was a fool and selfish, that she was neglecting you for the sake of her career. She said I was jealous, that I wanted to turn her into a housewife just like I was. None of that was true, but I was using you as an excuse, just the same. She did this strange thing, you see. She asked me to look after that pendant. She had never done anything like that before, and she never took off that chain. Her best friend in college gave it to her and she always wore it, even in the shower. I got it into my head that something terrible was going to happen. I couldn't bear the thought of losing her, you see." She took Anita's hand, squeezing her fingers with surprising strength. "I used to take photographs, too, a long time ago. There was a time when I thought I might make something of it, but what with Melanie being born and Claes leaving like that it was all so difficult, so complicated. I suppose I just let things slide. I was just beginning to think I might take it up again, pick up where I left off. But then Melanie died and it was as if the tide had gone out and left me stranded. Like walking along the beach at dusk, you know how it is here, when the tide is out and the sand is wet and shiny as a mirror. It's beautiful, the dusk, but it's the loneliest time of the day. I felt so lost, as if I'd never be able to find my way home again. I even felt some sympathy with them, you know, with the people who did it, the God people. The idea of space travel seemed so terrifying, so dangerous, like straying into a house where bad things are. It felt all wrong to me, even though I was so proud of her I could hardly breathe."

She reached for the pendant again, holding it between finger and thumb. "Your friend Rachel was so beautiful. I think she is very brave to give all that up."

"She still is beautiful, Gran," said Anita. "At least she is to me." She sat down on the edge of the bed. Her eyes felt swollen from crying. "Come on," she said. "Let's go and see who's in the dining room." She stood up and put out her hand. Her grandmother stared at it in bewilderment, as if at some miraculous apparition. Anita wondered how much of their conversation she would remember. The new drugs showed amazing results, but the doctor had warned her not to be over-optimistic about the long-term prognosis.

"It's like blowing on dying embers," he said. "There's a glow, and a little warmth, but it doesn't last."

It struck her how unusual it was, his mode of expression, so rich in metaphor, almost like the speech of a poet. She thought of his tired eyes, his twisted fingers, of how kind he was really, especially when delivering bad news. How he seemed to take each failure to heart, as if he were personally responsible for medicine being so powerless against death.

I wonder if I could film him, she thought. I wonder if he would let me, if I asked.

The boxes were in the cupboard under the stairs, pushed right to the back behind the vacuum cleaner and her grandmother's old ironing board. There were three of them, two large ones stamped with the logo of a well-known food company and another, half the size, which was unmarked. She opened the small box first. She had only sketchy memories of packing the crates, of what had gone into each of them, but she saw almost at once that what the third box contained was mostly her mother's official papers – birth certificate, passport, medical – and nothing of immediate importance. The other two were more interesting. These contained photographs and postcards, letters from old boyfriends, a fudge tin full of pin badges and a pencil sharpener in the shape of the *Apollo 13*. At the bottom of the second crate there were three cloth-bound notebooks that contained Melanie's diary for her final year at Oxford and for the months leading up to her enrolment in the space program. Anita was surprised to learn she had gone in as a ground engineer. She supposed this was how she had met Malcolm Schleif, although there was no mention of him in these pages.

Tucked into the inside cover of one of the notebooks was a postcard, a colour reproduction of Roland Savery's *Dodo in a Landscape*. A single sentence, *don't forget your wings*, was scrawled across the back in spiky black capitals. The card had been posted from Oxford, and was addressed to Melanie at the Shooter's Hill flat. It was signed *with all love from Susanne*. Anita could see from the postmark that it had been sent less than a month before her mother's death.

She searched quickly through the bundles of letters, hoping to discover some clue to Susanne's identity. After five minutes or so she found what she was looking for, a brown jiffy bag containing several dozen handwritten letters and about the same number of email printouts, all from a Susanne Behrens, who wrote sometimes from Hamburg and sometimes from Oxford but always in tones of affection and intimacy.

For some reason Susanne's letters, with their bawdy in-jokes

and cosy diminutives, made her mother more real to Anita than all her grandmother's reminiscences put together.

Her hands were filthy with dust. She wiped them against her jeans and went to put the kettle on. Just as the water boiled the phone rang. When she picked up the receiver she found herself speaking to Serge.

"I was just seeing if you were back yet," he said. "I couldn't get through on your mobile. I was starting to get a bit worried."

"My phone battery went flat," she said. "I forgot to take my charger. I only got back this morning." All three statements were lies. She had been back in London three days, and after the fourth successive call from Serge she had simply switched off her phone. For some reason she could not define Rachel's departure had changed everything. Also she could not forget the way he had sounded when she had last spoken to him, the sense that he had something to hide. She would have liked to put off their conversation indefinitely but she knew this was impossible. Sooner or later she would have to face up to what had happened.

She asked him how he was and he said he was fine. He asked after her grandmother and she mumbled back some stilted reply. There was a short, uncomfortable silence, and then he told her what she knew he had called about in the first place.

"Listen, Anita," he said. "I thought I should tell you I've started seeing someone. I didn't want you to hear it from someone else."

Her name was Bella Altman and she was a composer of electronic music. "You've probably heard some of her stuff, actually," he said. "She's done hundreds of commercials. Her work is all over the place." He laughed, a small, tight sound that she had never heard before. She realised he had been waiting to tell her ever since their last phone call, that perhaps he had wanted to tell her even then.

"Why are you telling me this?" she said. "Don't you think you should be telling Rachel instead?"

There was another uncomfortable silence. "Do you think she has to know?" he said finally. "She's hardly going to find out on her own."

He was asking her permission to treat Rachel as if she were dead. No, she thought suddenly. *He's trying to find out if you mean to tell her yourself.*

She felt an anger so deep and so cold she knew there was no way back from it, that if she and Serge ever met again it would be as strangers.

"I'm not going to rat on you, if that's what you're afraid of," she said. "What you do is none of my business. It's Rachel that I care about, not you."

She waited for a moment to see if he would say anything else and then she put down the phone. She topped up her coffee mug with boiling water and then went back to sorting Melanie's letters. She wondered what might be the best way of trying to trace Susanne Behrens.

Civilian flights to the States had become almost prohibitively expensive, but Clement Anderson had supported Anita's visa application, which had enabled her to claim back some of the cost in the form of a research grant.

A junior officer had met her at the airport and escorted her to a motel a short bus ride from the base. Then there were the

inevitable protocols, two days of debriefing and form-filling. She had asked if she could film these processes but her request had been politely denied.

The flight crew of the *Aurora 6* were now being kept in more or less permanent isolation. Each member was allowed one last visit prior to launch day, a final thirty minutes with a friend or family member from outside. Anita had been able to speak to Rachel several times on the telephone but she had always assumed the visit would go to Serge. The invitation came out of the blue.

Finally she was taken to a room that was bare of everything except a table and two chairs and in the corner a low sofa covered in a brown leatherette. There was a pane of smoked glass set into one wall that she guessed was a two-way mirror. At the end of some ten minutes' waiting the door opened and Rachel appeared. She was dressed in grey overalls, silk or some synthetic substitute. What remained of her hair was mostly hidden under a close-fitting cap that reminded Anita of the caps worn by surgeons in the operating theatre. The few strands of hair that were showing looked dry and brittle, almost like tufts of grass.

Her lips were the colour of beetroot. They looked stuck to her face more than part of it, fissured and clotted as scabs.

She closed the door behind her and stepped into the room. Her wrists, poking out from the loose sleeves of the overall, were skeletal, her fingernails thickened and black. Her eyes were hard and glazed, barely human. It was only in the delicate line of her jaw, the fine, high arch of her brow, that any traces of her beauty now remained.

Anita got up from the table and went towards her. She felt a dull ache beneath her breastbone, as if she were trying to hold her breath underwater.

"Is it all right to touch you?" she said.

"Of course it is," said Rachel. "Come here."

They embraced. Rachel's body felt like a bundle of glass tubes held together by strips of paper and pieces of string. She smelled like farm silage, or like the heaps of grass clippings on the compost heap at Southwater House. They sat down either side of the Formica table. Anita touched Rachel's hand, thinking how from the other side of the two-way mirror they must look like two actors in some prison drama.

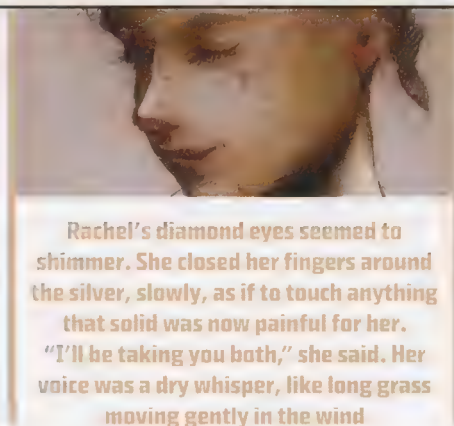
She's really going up, thought Anita. For the first time the sight of her friend brought not sorrow or anger, but awe.

They talked together in quiet voices. Rachel asked about Meredith, and Anita told her about her search for Susanne Behrens.

"I want to interview her for the film," said Anita. "From her letters it looks as if she knew my mother better than anyone."

"The film will be wonderful," said Rachel. "Your mother would have been so proud." Anita stroked the backs of her hands. As their half hour drew toward its close she unhooked the dodo pendant from around her neck and handed it to Rachel. The chain still carried the warmth of her own body.

"Take her with you, wherever you're going," she said. "It's what she wanted most in the world."



Rachel's diamond eyes seemed to shimmer. She closed her fingers around the silver, slowly, as if to touch anything that solid was now painful for her. "I'll be taking you both," she said. Her voice was a dry whisper, like long grass moving gently in the wind

Rachel's diamond eyes seemed to shimmer. She closed her fingers around the silver, slowly, as if to touch anything that solid was now painful for her.

"I'll be taking you both," she said. Her voice was a dry whisper, like long grass moving gently in the wind. "I couldn't have done this without you."

It took Anita some time to track down a copy of *Voyage to the Sun*. So far as she could tell it had never been released on DVD, and when she finally located a video copy on some obscure fan site she was surprised at how much it cost

to have it transferred to disc.

The print was by no means perfect, but for a VHS transfer it was more than acceptable. For Anita, *Voyage to the Sun* seemed to epitomise the epic style of film making that had reached its zenith towards the end of the twentieth century. It was a long film, almost three hours, replete with significant imagery and spectacular if rather dated special effects.

The film's main actors were Rowan Amherst as the ship's captain, Hilary Benson as the first mate, and Aurelie Pelling as Lilian Furness, the captain's fiancée, nominated for an Oscar in her role. Anita found all three of them impressive, although for her the star was undoubtedly the young Joshua Samuelson in the part of Linden Brooks the cabin boy. It was his first major role, and he played it brilliantly. The character of Brooks was ambiguous. He was intelligent but devious, brave but duplicitous, and Samuelson brought out these contradictions with insight and flair. Anita thought it significant and appropriate that the main focus of the film's closing sequence was not the half-starved captain or the mutinous first mate but the Machiavellian cabin boy.

Alone of everyone on board he seemed to thrive on the harsh conditions. His skin was scorched almost black and there was not a spare ounce of body fat on him, and yet his pale eyes burned with a pure light that was almost ecstatic in its intensity.

He flew hand over hand up the rigging to the crow's nest, skinny and agile as a monkey. "*Land*," he screamed out. "*Land ho!*" His salt-clogged hair flamed red against an azure sky.

The images were pure Hollywood, but in the way of all great cinema they were inspiring and in their own way beautiful. Anita found she had no trouble in understanding how the child-Rachel, her young soul already on fire with romantic ideals, would have identified with these fictional pioneers. Linden Brooks the cabin boy, with his blaze of red hair and frenzied excitement at the sight of a new continent, might easily have been her twin brother.

She ejected the disc from the machine and replaced it carefully in its clear plastic case, knowing it was a part of Rachel she could keep close to her forever. She thought of her friend, suspended in space, her inner processes as mysterious and miraculous now as those of a chrysalis, and distinctly felt a message pass between them.

'Flying in the Face of God' is set in the same version of reality as Nina's earlier story 'Angelus', which won the Aeon Award in 2007. Nina's most recent appearance in *Interzone* was in issue 222 with 'Microcosmos'. She lives and works in London.

CHRIS BECKETT : JOHNNY'S NEW JOB

Monday it was all round the factory where Johnny worked that a little girl called Jenny Sue had been killed by her wicked stepfather. He had dropped her down a dry well and left her there to starve.

Wednesday, the case was officially declared by the government to be an instance of Welfare Knew And Did Nothing (within the meaning of the Summary Judgement Act) so of course everyone kept their ears open and sure enough pretty soon the thrilling voice of the Public Accuser came booming out of the factory Screens, demanding on behalf of everyone there that culprits be identified for him to Name.

"Ordinary decent folk have had enough!" the Public Accuser told the city government, while every single soul in the factory stood raptly listening. "Those responsible must pay the Price."

Everyone cheered. "Too right! You go Accuser!"

And Accuser stared down at them, that dark unsmiling face, huge on the giant screen.

And then on came Factory Manager Number One and suggested that they all do two hours of extra work for nothing, in memory of the little girl. "Let's all do our bit extra," Factory Manager said. "It's what Jenny Sue would have wanted."

And everyone cheered once more and returned to their looms, working with such gusto that their output for the next two hours was the same as it would normally be in half a day. And some of them had tears running down their faces as they worked and worked for that poor dear dead little child.

They knew they'd need time off, you see, when Welfare's Name was announced.

Friday afternoon at three, Screen gave out that the Announcement of Welfare's Name would be in an hour's time at City Hall, to be done by the Public Accuser himself.

"Work hard as you can to half three," said Factory Manager, "and then knock off early and go with my blessing on full pay. I know you all want to do your bit. And I will do mine."

And once again everyone cheered, and told each other he really wasn't so bad at all as bosses go, and they set to and worked at the looms as hard as they could until half-past three. Then it was down tools and on with coats and down through the grey streets to City Hall where a big crowd was already gathering, with a brass band playing solemn music for the memory of the little girl and a big flag hanging from the balcony.

Announcement was never on time. The last time it had happened was when Welfare took a little boy away from his loving mum and dad, and they both begged her not to, but the Welfare Officer didn't care, that heartless cow, even though the mum was pretty and the dad had once served in the wars in Araby. The wait was over seventy minutes that time and the crowd was going crazy with impatience by the time the Announcement was made. But in a way that was all part of it. Announcement on time would spoil things really. It wouldn't give folk a chance to wind themselves up for what had to be done.

Anyway, at ten past four the Mayor came out onto the balcony.

"Fellow citizens, it is my sad duty to announce that a dear little girl from our city has died *due to the criminal negligence of Welfare*."

There must have been two, three thousand there. Everyone cheered and pretty soon the old familiar chant went up.

"The names! The names! The names!"

And the Mayor gave a little wave as if to say, I do know and I'd like to tell you but I'm afraid it's not my job. And on the big screen above, where his face was shown as high as a double-decker bus, you could see his little smile as if he was sharing with everybody the impatience he felt with that as a human being, whether or not he was Mayor. And everyone said to themselves, well, he's not so bad, he's just like us really.

Then the Mayor went back inside – "The names! The names! The names!" – and presently out he came again with that same shy little smile and held up his hands for quiet. It was nearly half-past four by then. "Citizens! Citizens! Thank you as ever for your commitment and concern. You make me proud to lead this great city. It is my great pleasure and honour now to give to you that mighty defender of all that is good and decent in our community, that fierce guardian of everything that is right. I give you... The Public Accuser."

And out came Accuser in his black robe, and you could see on the screen that he never even nodded to Mayor, never even smiled.

"The names!" yelled out Johnny, just as everyone else was settling down, so you could hear his individual voice right across the square.

And Accuser looked at him, looked over the top of his half-moon glasses right across the square at poor little Johnny down there in the crowd.

Johnny went bright red. "Well I was only saying..." he muttered.

"My fellow citizens," boomed out Accuser, "a terrible crime has again been committed by Welfare in whom we generously placed our trust. We did not ask much of them. We did not ask of them that they make our city rich. We did not ask of them that they heal the sick. All we asked of them – the one little thing we asked – was that they protect our children, our precious little ones, and to ensure that none of them came to harm. And yet they failed, again they failed, again they betrayed the little ones. And it has been looked into, as ever, by the proper people, and we are now at that point we always reach on these occasions when I tell you the name, or names, of the officers concerned."

He slowly unfolded a piece of paper, placed it on the dais in front of him and smoothed it out.

"I have so far identified just one Welfare Officer who must take the blame, though more names may likely follow later."

Accuser paused, looked out over his half-moon glasses to make sure the people were ready for the full seriousness of what he was about to say.

"That negligent and heartless Officer is..."

Again he paused.



"That blundering and incompetent fool... That disgrace both to manhood and to our city... is..."

And here he looked down at his paper.

"...is Officer David Simpson of 15 Lavender Grove, Uptown."

The crowd booed and hissed. Accuser took off his glasses and scanned the faces below, as if to make sure that everyone present had fully understood.

But he need not have worried. The people were already surging out of the square, bellowing with grief and rage.

And off Johnny went with them, striding and sometimes even running through the streets, adding his own impatience to the general haste to get to 15 Lavender Grove and get the job done, and enjoying the feeling of being part of a big crowd who were all feeling the same thing.

"Welfare Officer David Simpson," announced Screens along the way, "had been receiving a salary of seventy thousand gold crowns a year..."

There were cries of incredulity and rage.

"...owns a real car," the next Screen was saying.

You heard bits as you passed the Screens every fifty metres or so, and then in between you couldn't hear.

"...and this year he went for a holiday in sunny Tartary with his wife Jennifer and his two children, Horace and Portia, both at Younger's Infant School. That's on Upton High Street, by the way, and here are the pictures of the kids..."

The crowd looked up at the children and hissed.

"How would he have liked it if it had been one of them?"

"Tartary, eh?" the announcer was musing aloud on the next Screen. "Tartary. Not bad. Not bad at all for a man who was paid to care for little children *and instead stood back and did nothing while an innocent little girl was killed.*"

"The bastard, get him!" yelled Johnny, who wouldn't have minded a holiday in Tartary himself.

"Yes, get him," agreed the folk all around him, hurrying earnestly through the streets, determined that what happened to Jenny Sue must *never ever happen again.*

"We're doing this for you, Jenny sweetheart!" shouted out a woman nearby, in a voice that started strong and ended with a sob.

"For you, Jenny Sue!" the crowd yelled with her, and many joined her in angry tears.

"Someone ought to chuck *his* little girl down a well and see how he likes it," a man said to Johnny, a tiny little man with a huge moustache. "See how he feels about that."

Well that sounded fair enough to Johnny so he yelled it out.

"Let's get his little girl Portia," he yelled. "Let's chuck *her* down a well!"

"Yeah, let's get her," a few people around him called out.

But it was a bit half-hearted and quickly petered out, as if the crowd sensed that there was a contradiction here somewhere, even if it was hard to put your finger on it.

Poor Johnny felt a bit crushed that his contribution had gone unappreciated but a kindly woman beside him put her hand gently on his shoulder.

"We might hate her," the woman said, "and we might well hope that she dies too, a horrible cruel death, so he can see what it's like, and be truly sorry. But she is only a child after all, whatever we might think of her. We've got to remember that."

When they reached the sign that said WELCOME TO UPTON everybody cheered, and for a little while the crowd milled about in the middle of a crossroads, wondering where to go next, growing and spreading out into the surrounding streets as more people poured in from behind. Traffic lights went red, orange, green, orange, red to no avail while cars and vans waited respectfully for these good but justifiably angry people to move on in their own good time.

"Where's Lavender Grove, mate?" the crowd called out collectively to the people of Upton.

"Up that way, turn right and then left, you can't miss it, mate," the people of Upton called back as one in strong stern voices, only too glad to be of help. And some of them joined in and came along.

And pretty soon the crowd reached Lavender Grove, and the people were shouting and yelling and squeezing themselves in as best they could.

It was a street of little detached houses with tidy front gardens. Outside every house on the street there were law officers in blue to make sure that no one got carried away.

"It's frustrating, isn't it?" said a tall man near Johnny. "You want to do over the whole damn street of them, don't you?"

"Course you do," Johnny said.

But the man's friend opined that it didn't *really* help to take it out on the neighbours. A neighbour's proper role in this situation was more to come out and tell stories to Screen about the one being Named.

"...about how they never would have thought it, and all that," the man said.

"Well, I suppose," the first man reluctantly agreed.

There were law officers in front of number 15 too. But they were there for a different reason. Their job was to ensure that the people inside did not slip away before it was time. They had a couple of cars ready with their engines running and red lights going round and round on top. Pretty soon the sergeant in charge decided there were enough people crowded into the street. He nodded to the officer by the door, and the officer gave a sharp rap and soon out came the wife Jennifer and the two children Horace and Portia, their faces white with the knowledge of their sin. For, as everyone knows, to be in the presence of sin *is* sin. It's something you catch like a disease.

And the crowd booed and hissed and yelled and a couple of hotheads rushed forward to lay into them, dear good passionate

young fellows that they were, and had to be gently pushed back by the law.

Cold and stern, the law put the mother and the two children in one of their cars and off it went down the street with the other car following after. You could see they didn't like it any more than anyone else, letting Welfare's family get off lightly like that, but they had their job to do, and all credit to them.

"Chuck *them* down a well and see how he likes it," yelled a fat woman, and a great roar of approval went up.

Johnny looked at her enviously and wondered what she'd got that he hadn't. But he noticed that the crowd seemed to sense somehow that these were only words, not an actual proposal to act. It let the car go by and out of Lavender Grove and off to wherever it was they were going.

So now it was down to the *real* business. All these good honest people who'd come up here from City Hall were standing looking at the front door of 15 Lavender Grove and everyone there knew there was no more wife and kids or anyone else in there, just Named Welfare himself on his own. And it was a strange feeling, a strange exciting feeling that you felt going right through you, in your body as well as in your mind, a bit like sex, knowing he was inside there, scared witless, and knowing that somehow or other they would soon get him out.

And then there was a rustle of excitement from the back of the crowd, and calls of "Gangway! Gangway!" and people moved back to make a path for Accuser himself, arriving not in a car but on foot, there in the actual flesh, moving among them. He passed so close that Johnny could reach out and touch his black robe as he went by.

Straight up to the house went Accuser and rapped hard on the door. "David Simpson!" bellowed the Public Accuser. "Come out and face the people of this city."

Nothing. No sound from inside at all. So Accuser, grim-faced, picked three strong men from the crowd and they all went into the house and pretty soon, after a little bit of muffled shouting, came out again with the despicable man who had let little Jenny die. The crowd, the poor wounded grieving crowd, went crazy with rage, screaming and yelling at him that he was scum and vermin.

Accuser held up his hands for quiet, and then he turned to the snivelling Welfare and demanded of him loudly and firmly and with great dignity that he own up to what he had done.

"Do you deny that it was your fault that that dear little girl was thrown down the well?" boomed Accuser in his great and dreadful voice.

The Welfare Officer said something that no one but Accuser could hear.

"He says *he did his best*," Accuser repeated, as if he was handling something dirty with tongs. "He says it's not always easy to know what is going to happen in advance. He says he had a lot on."

Accuser looked out at the crowd, letting that contemptible drivell sink in. Then he roared out the rage that they all felt.

"What could he have had on that was more important than saving a little girl? What is more important than that? Holidays in Tartary, perhaps?"

He held his hands out wide in a gesture of helplessness. Even

Accuser, it seemed, was still dumbfounded by the flimsiness of these people's excuses. Even Accuser shared the bewilderment of ordinary decent folk.

"Do we need to hear more?" he asked

"No! No! No!" hollered the crowd, for it was anxious to get on.

And it trusted Accuser, it knew it could rely on everything he said. He was so good at exposing these wretched Welfare Officers, and laying bare their craven willingness to be led and misled by others. Why should anyone else even bother to try?

As he walked away from the lynching with the rest of the crowd, Johnny felt a little...strange. Not that he didn't feel cleansed, not that he didn't feel uplifted. But yet all the same he did feel just a little bit uneasy.

And actually people in general were quite quiet as they trailed out through the grey old streets. A few enthusiasts were chanting and shouting – "Well! Well! Well! Welfare! Well! Well! Well! Farewell!" – but on the whole most people were quiet.

"It was for Jenny," Johnny reminded himself. "It was for little Jenny Sue, and to make sure it never ever happens again."

And even as he thought this to himself he heard a woman nearby saying the very same thing to her friend.

"We had to do it didn't we? For Jenny Sue."

They all talked about that little girl as if they knew her.

"It's not like we *want* to do stuff like that," the woman told her friend.

"Of course not," her friend agreed. "It's the last thing we'd want to do if there was any choice in the matter."

Soon afterwards Johnny ran into some people he knew from the factory: Ralph, Angela, Mike and a few more who were going to get a drink. Johnny had always been a bit of a loner, a bit on the edge of things, and people like that wouldn't normally have thought of asking him to come along, but at a time like this you stuck together.

"You coming for a jar Johnny, my old mate?" said Mike. "I think we deserve one after all that, don't you?"

They found a big bar in the city centre and began to drink quickly, their thirst not easily quenched. And while they drank, Screen gave out more news. There would definitely be more Names, it seemed. More would be given out next week.

"Well," grunted Ralph, who'd been near the front when the Price was paid. "I just hope they get it right when they name these Names."

Mike looked sharply up at him. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Well, if they Named the *wrong* people, it would..."

Ralph's voice tailed off. Everyone looked at him, dismayed.

"What exactly are you saying Ralph?" asked Mike coldly.

His voice had a warning edge and he looked round significantly at everyone there to confirm that he was speaking for all of them and that he counted on all of them for support.

"You want to be careful, Ralph mate," Mike said. "If I didn't know you better I'd think you didn't care about Jenny Sue."

"Yeah, that's right!" said Johnny, seeing a chance to establish himself. "You want to watch what you're saying, Ralph. If we don't go after the bastards that let her die, that poor little girl will have died for nothing."

Ralph looked a bit scared. "Of course I care about Jenny Sue," he said indignantly. "I'd lay down my own life if it would bring her back."

"Oh that's a lovely thing to say," exclaimed Angela, who liked to make the peace.

"And anyone who let her die," Ralph went on, "deserves everything they get."

Mike was mollified. He reached out and warmly grasped his friend's hand. "That's better, Ralph my old mate. That's the good old Ralph we know."

But here's the funny bit of the story. When Johnny was staggering home with seven pints inside him, he ran into six big blokes with shaven heads, stripy tops and cudgels in their hands. They came straight at him and he tried to run but he just couldn't manage it with all that beer in him.

"Steady! Steady!" they told him, laughing as he wriggled and squirmed in the grip of two of them.

There was a law man over the other side of the street and he was laughing too. And even Johnny gave a rueful smile, because of course he knew these blokes were government men and were only doing their job.

"You don't need me to tell you who we are do you, son?" asked the chief of them, a great neckless barrel of a man.

"No you don't, mate," Johnny said. "I know who you are. You're the press gang and it looks like you've got me fair and square."

"That's right mate," said their leader, "we're the press gang alright, and my name's Bobby Grab."

He put on his special electric glasses and reached out his fat hand so that Johnny could give him his government card.

"Johnny," Bobby Grab read out, "Johnny Jones. Works in the blanket factory for two hundred crowns a week. Well this is your lucky day, Johnny Jones, because in this job we've got lined up for you, they'll pay you twice that."

"Oh," said Johnny, very surprised, "so what service is that?"

"The Welfare, mate. They've had a bit of a recruitment problem lately for some reason, so they've had to get us on the job. Which means you're pressed mate. Five years national service in Welfare. Could be the making of you."

Johnny's face was white. "The Welfare? You've got to be kidding me. I don't want to be in Welfare!"

"Why not, mate? Why on earth not? The money's good and you'd be doing important work. Protecting children, protecting innocent little ones. What could be better work than that?"

"But... But look what happened to that Welfare today... I was there... They... We..."

At this Bobby Grab's face grew dark. "What are you saying, Johnny boy? Are you saying that David Simpson didn't deserve what he got? I find that hard to believe, I must say, after what happened to that poor little Jenny Sue."

"No, mate, of course not."

"Would that little girl have had to suffer if he'd done his job?"

"No, mate."

"You sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"I should hope you are. Otherwise what were you doing there, helping out at Lavender Grove this afternoon? What were you doing there if that was a man who didn't deserve it?"

"I'm not saying that."

"Well I'm relieved to hear it, mate."

"But... I might not be any good at the job. That's what I mean. I might not know what to do."

The gangman laughed indulgently. "You're forgetting something, mate. You're forgetting what always happens when a little child dies like Jenny Sue. First the Public Accuser does the Naming and sees that the Price is paid. But what comes next, eh? What comes next?"

"Um... I... er..."

"Then comes the Healer, doesn't he?" the gangman reminded him, as if he was talking to a child. "The Healer comes in, dressed in white, just as Accuser comes dressed in black. And Healer looks into it all doesn't he? And he listens to those who know about these things, and he makes new rules to ensure that it will never ever happen again. You must know that, mate! He does it every time!"

Johnny nodded yes, he supposed so. Truth be told, you didn't pay so much attention to these things after the Naming and the Price were done. And it wasn't on Screen much either.

"Trust me, my lad, that's how it works," said Bobby Grab, indulgently pinching Johnny's cheek between a fat finger and a fat thumb, as if he was a kind old uncle and Johnny was a little boy. Bobby turned his neckless head to look at his men. "I'm right boys, aren't I?" he asked.

"Spot on, boss, spot on."

"So what I'm saying," the gangman went on, "what I'm saying is that by the time you start work as a Welfare Officer, Healer will have come, and he'll tell you just what to do, and then all you'll have to do is do what he says and you'll be fine. Beats working in a blanket factory every time if you ask my opinion. And it's not as if you've got the build for our sort of work." He beamed round at the big men around him. All the gangmen laughed. "Just listen to the Healer, Johnny, and you'll be fine," advised Bobby Grab, and he nodded to his men to let Johnny go.

"Take the week off," he said. "That's the law. A week on full pay. And then you'll get a letter telling you what to do. Alright? You won't play silly buggers will you? You know that we'd only come and find you? Course you do. And anyway, when you think about what I've said, you'll realise that this could be just the chance you need. After all, a fair-minded young fellow like you wouldn't have gone to the lynching if you didn't know perfectly well that any half-decent human being could do a better job than Officer Simpson. It wouldn't really have been right."

He gave Johnny a hearty slap on the back to send him on his way, and then the gang headed off into town looking for more young men and women. And Johnny headed home.

But all the way he kept noticing the Screens with their promises of new Names next week. And he dreamt that night that he was alone at the bottom of a well, like poor little Jenny Sue.

Chris Beckett's story collection *The Turing Test* (Elastic Press) won the Edge Hill Short Fiction Award for 2009. A new UK edition of his first novel *The Holy Machine* will be published this year by Corvus. 'Johnny's New Job' is Chris's 23rd story in *Interzone* and one of four or five that are connected in some way with his professional life. Formerly a social worker in the child and family field, he still teaches and writes about social work. His new website is at chris-beckett.com.



In April Centipede Press will publish *In Concert*, collecting *all* of the Melanie & Steve Tem collaborative short stories, beautifully illustrated by Howie Michels and Marc Chagall. Macabre Digital Ink recently reissued their dark adventure fantasy novel *Daughters* in electronic format, which can be ordered at macabreink.com.

the glare and the **GLOW** steve rasnic tem

James Thurber once said there are two kinds of light: the glow that illuminates and the glare that obscures. I've always liked quotations. Whatever their content, they always seem apropos. If your audience doesn't immediately grasp the connection, they're inclined to think they just aren't learned enough. I suppose they assume that if you've read enough to offer them some quotation, you must be smart enough to use it correctly.

I read a great deal. Unfortunately I've come to the conclusion that I understand very little of what I read. I can be thoroughly involved in a novel and still not know what it's all about. One of the differences between novels and real life is supposedly that the novel has a theme. I believe that's another quotation, but for the life of me I can't remember the source, or enough of the original context to quote it more precisely. Some people say there are no original ideas. I sometimes wonder if I don't remember the source, does that make it an original thought? Following that line of reasoning, the people with the poorest memories must be geniuses.

Perhaps you've had the experience of just starting to say something, but at the last second you become convinced it's a quotation, and maybe you're afraid you'll make some embarrassing misquote, or maybe you're afraid people will think you're trying to pass off someone else's thoughts as your own. So you say nothing. I think this may account for many awkward conversational silences. At least it does in my case. Some days I hardly say anything, so convinced I am that I understand nothing, and that every thought I have is stolen from someone else possessed of far better understanding than I.

About a month ago my wife and I brought a bad bunch of light bulbs into the house. I don't mean that we acquired the bulbs as part of some joint purchasing decision – we just haven't been able to pinpoint who bought this particular carton. Not that it matters that much – sometimes married couples just like to keep score. I'm sure that's a quote; I'm sure I don't remember who said it first.

We go through a lot of light bulbs in our house. It's an old house utilizing a hodgepodge of wiring techniques, a regular electrical museum, which means surges and shorts, which seriously affect the lifespan of a bulb. What was it Dave Barry said about electricity? Something about how we believe it exists because the electric company sends us bills for it? We've tried the usual conservational measures – turning some of those light bulbs off, using fluorescent replacements – but we haven't been all that successful at maintaining the changes. That's probably more my fault than hers. I don't think I have particularly lavish needs, but I do feel I deserve to walk around in as much light as possible, and not sit in the shadows worrying over what I might not see. "Let your light shine." Oprah said that. And I love to read – we both do – a good reading light or two are essential in our house. Frankly, I don't know how anyone can stand fluorescents. Is that real light? I hardly think so – it's like moon glow bouncing off a snow bank. Kind of pretty, but strange and useless.

So we tend to buy cheaper bulbs, and lots of them. I know that's probably not the most economical thing to do. But the more expensive bulbs seem to burn out almost as quickly in our house as the cheap ones so what's the difference? We've developed this pattern of buying large quantities, burning through them fiercely, buying more to feed that bright, illuminating fire that both comforts and exhausts us. Shakespeare said "we burn daylight." I don't know exactly what that means, but it still manages to chill me.

I knew there was something different about these bulbs the second I opened the box. Something about their color, when they're cold, no electricity applied. Now, I'm used to the cheaper bulbs looking a little different. Maybe it's illusory and they're all pretty much the same, but to my eye they do look cheaper, just lying there, their insides less frosty, and a kind of shadow already inside, resting, as if their *potential* for light must be less. I actually wondered if perhaps we'd been tricked into buying previously-used, burnt-out bulbs.

Then when I pulled one out I was surprised, shocked I suppose, by its heaviness. The sensation made me somewhat sick to my stomach. My wife and I have a peaceful life – we do not expect such things. "Expect nothing, live frugally on surprise," to quote Alice Walker.

As I turned the bulb the heaviness shifted inside it. I didn't think it contained liquid – no sensation of sloshing. But perhaps something solid, yet fluid. Sand maybe, but it felt too heavy for that. Moving it gently side to side, as if I were rocking it, brought eggs and their hidden embryos to mind, which made me feel both rude and foolish. That would not be a perception I'd share with my wife, who has long thought me a bit too much on the crude side.

Of course, Thomas Jefferson called politeness "artificial good humor," and that's not exactly positive, is it? Nothing artificial about my humor. The world is a funny old place. If you don't

laugh about it, you cry.

We never had children, but it wasn't for lack of trying. I don't know why we didn't try the cures, or the alternatives. We never really talked about it. We left all that back in the shadows and just went on with our lives.

I put that first bulb down on the table and stared at it. Careful not to break it, but definitely wanting it out of my hands. With the metal base turned away from me, and no brand name or insignia visible, it did so look like an egg.

I went back to the carton of eight. I should have noticed before – the entire carton was heavy, remarkably so. But for the time being I left the rest of the bulbs where they were. I put the carton back down and pulled up a chair, examining the packaging. BULBS was the only word on the carton, in big black letters. No brand, no manufacturer's name or address, no instructions, no copyright, no trademark, no guarantee, not even a price. You couldn't get much more generic than that.

Iris Murdoch said truth was like brown. "Truth is so generic," she said. But did she mean that was a good thing or a bad thing? That's the trouble with quotes. It sounds like she thought truth was really no big deal. But what else is there?

And I didn't want to use those bulbs, but again, what else was there? Sometimes, to quote Eleanor Roosevelt, "You must do the thing you think you cannot do." I had to use them, unless I wanted to walk around in darkness, which I'd had enough of in my lifetime already. I didn't want to make a return trip to the store. I just don't like the lighting. All those fluorescents. They make you rush your shopping. You'll grab anything, buy anything, just to get out of there. They illuminate people's irrationality more than anything else.

So I screwed one of these odd bulbs into an out-of-the-way, little used lamp we keep in the front hall. Mostly its purpose is to illuminate the coat rack if one of us needs to go out at night. But neither of us goes out much. So what if one of us looked like we'd gotten dressed in the dark? Who would care?

I wasn't too pleased about having the bulb in my hand for the time necessary to secure it in the socket. Besides the uncanny weight of it, the glass conveyed a dead cold feel against my palm, and there was a hard-to-describe sensation just this side of dampness as I gripped and turned it, as if the bulb were sweating on its inside surface. And the weight inside seemed to more than shift, to respond to the movement being forced upon it with some sort of intelligence. I might have told my wife, "This is no dim bulb!" if I were but moderately clever.

I noticed right away that it had almost a lubricated feel as it glided into the turns of the socket. Usually you feel a kind of scraping resistance when you screw in a bulb – cheap metal against cheap metal. Usually it snags a bit – sometimes you have to back it out and start all over. But here I felt nothing at all. I come back to Eleanor Roosevelt for my wisdom: "When life is too easy for us, we must beware." I was practically terrified.

But once I had the bulb firmly planted and flipped the switch I was *amazed*. What a light did bloom! It was almost pure white, whiter than a Halogen, but cooler. You could look directly at it without too much discomfort. And although I immediately saw the shadow inside, a shape that moved, I noticed that that somewhat mysterious presence diminished the illumination not one bit. In fact, it appeared to manipulate the rays, and focus

them, so that they spread at a speed you could actually perceive. You could see that light creep across the details of the room, at varying rates no doubt due to the varying densities of detail encountered. So, gradually, shadows were eaten, and things were revealed, so that old scars in the woodwork suddenly became remembered, the residue of stains recalled, unevenness of tile, and dirt in areas I'd thought completely clean.

Even these flaws, once seen in such startling detail, became random incidents of beauty, and the truly beautiful things – a piece of tapestry, a strip of wallpaper, crystalline vase, a dead cousin's photograph – became almost overwhelming to view. I stumbled out of the front hall, tears in my eyes. I can't say I was at all embarrassed by this. For "there's a sacredness in tears," to quote Washington Irving.

I know now I should have taken my time with the bulbs. My wife and I have never been ones to rush into things. We're always so careful! But I couldn't seem to stop myself. I went around to the lights in the living room, the dining room, my study, and our bedroom, switching out those old dusty bulbs with the rather odd, somewhat weighted bulbs from that new generic carton.

As I screwed in each bulb, and turned it on, and left it on, it really was as if a fire had been lit. "Man is the only creature that dares to light a fire and live with it," said one Henry Vandyke. The light flowed from each bulb, transforming our home, each separate stream seeking the companionship of the others, and morphing everything they touched into something beautiful and true. As these bulbs performed their magic I chased the light around our home, and I found an even braver brilliance where the edges of each separate stream met. And yes, I found myself dancing and singing to observe this, very much the idiot. "Every man plays the fool once in his life," according to Mr Congreve, and certainly this was my time, my time to shine, as it were. I felt as brilliant as those creatures, those embryos, inside the bulbs.

Because that's what they were, weren't they? I wouldn't know what else to call them, these little creatures with their oversized heads and dangly arms, playing with this startling light as if it were their first and only plaything. I just so wanted to see their darling little faces!

So I kept easing closer to each flaming bulb, staring as long as I dared, even longer, examining their precious silhouettes, willing myself to see their delicate faces even through frosted glass. It actually seemed possible. "John, what on *earth* are you doing?"

I stared at my wife. I couldn't take my eyes off her. "No," I said. "That's not quite all of it. The full quotation is 'what on earth are you doing for heaven's sake.'"

What was I seeing? She looked unhappy, but she always looked unhappy. But now I was seeing it in such refined detail: the disappointments, the displeasures, the wear and tear, the rub, the whispers, and the dying. And around her like a halo, like a cocoon: this house, much loved, and all that we'd put in it, and taken out, and so much of it accidental, without our choosing, just following habit, bad, lazy habit, just not thinking.

"You and your damn quotations! Couldn't we just have a normal conversation now and then? Couldn't you just tell me how you feel for once without dragging it out of the lips of someone famous, or dead? So tell me, I'm so *unoriginal*, who was it that said 'what on earth,' and 'what are you doing,' and 'for heaven's sake,' and all that, for heaven's sake!"

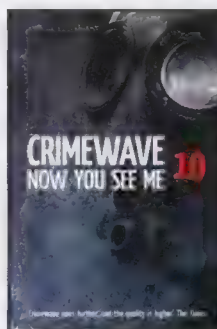
"I don't know," I replied into the beautiful face of my disappointed, dying wife. "It's anonymous. All the books call it 'source unknown.'"

"Then as far as you know, it could be original with me, right? I've never asked you before, have I? What you were doing with our life? I just let things go." She squeezed her eyes shut. "God, it's so *bright* in here! Where's all this terrible light coming from?"

"It's okay," I said. "It's these new bulbs I bought," I said, going to the lamp and shutting it off. "Don't open your eyes yet, okay, honey? I've brought some really bad bulbs into the house. I wouldn't want you to hurt your eyes! Let me just get them all shut off, and when they cool off, I'll throw them away, smash them out in the garbage can, you know? So no one else can get their hands on these bad bulbs."

I chattered on, making very little sense, walking from room to room and switching off those terrible bulbs, and every time I switched one off, I swear I could hear a little sigh, once the current was cut and my intentions were clear. And as I moved about that darkening house I could hear my wife weeping, not saying anything, just crying, and I wondered, just as I had seen those things in her, what, exactly, had she seen in me?

But ignorance is bliss, according to a thousand different authors, a hundred thousand fellow sufferers along the road. I kept this constant in mind as I wandered through the dark.



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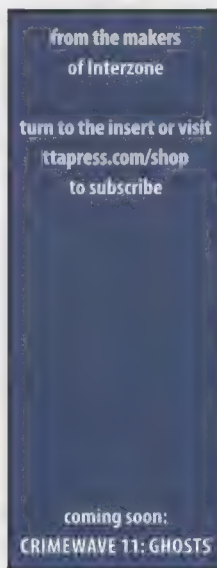
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The Terror and the Tortoiseshell by John Travis

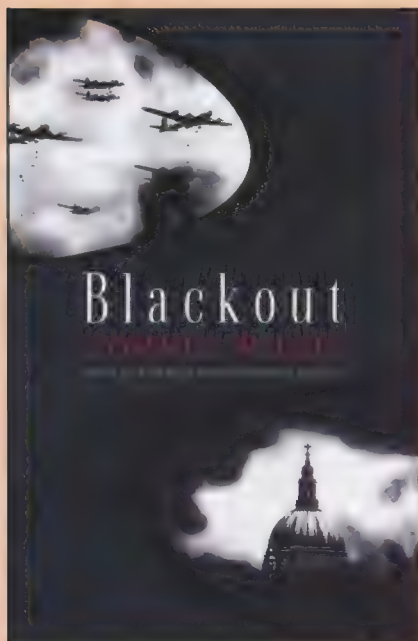
The long-awaited début novel from John Travis is a Murder Mystery with deft touches of both Comedy and Science Fiction. Primarily, this is a classic, hard-boiled, detective novel of the 1940s, which just happens to have a sentient, six-foot tall, suit-wearing cat as the shamus.

★ Animal Farm meets The Big Sleep in this... compelling hard-boiled mystery... Travis packs a lot in, including a twisty whodunit plot, humorous sequences to lighten the grimness... superior work.

—Publishers Weekly (Jan 11TH, 2010)

Jacketless Hardback: £ 19.⁹⁹ UK — \$34.⁹⁹ CAN/USA

BOOK ZONE



BLACKOUT

Connie Willis

Spectra, 492pp, \$26 hb

There's one big problem trying to review Connie Willis's latest book, *Blackout*.

No, it's not the quality of the writing. Willis deftly reveals characterization through people's actions and reactions, with no authorial tapping on the reader's shoulder to explain what's going on. She assumes the reader is intelligent enough to pick up information without the need for subtitles and unrealistic info dumping. Admittedly, there is a lot of information; the level of period detail about life on England's Home Front is almost overwhelming at times. Yet even those pages that could be dismissed as nothing more than self-congratulatory travelogue – for example, a bus tour of central London just before the Nazi bombs fall – beguile the reader with the quality of the writing. It's only later that you begin to suspect they aren't just the author showing off their research.

Nor is the problem the author's clear belief in the reality of everyday heroes in the world; it's placed simply as the goal of one of the main time traveller's research projects, and the actions of the characters as the novel progress simply underline this essentially optimistic view.

Neither is it the relatively 'relaxed' pacing of the novel, which has the confidence to take its time to crank up the tension of something not being quite right for the various Oxford historians from 2060 who are carrying out field research during the Second World War.

Nor is it even the fact the relatively brief glimpses we get of Willis's 2060 are – time travel and memory implants not withstanding – remarkably free of mobile phones, the internet and traffic jams. This may give the book a slightly old-fashioned air, but in a sense it seems somewhat right that the world of academia is happy to keep the modern world at bay – assuming that's what's happening, of course.

The simple problem trying to review *Blackout* is that it's only half of a story.

CONNIE WILLIS: ORDINARY HEROES REVIEW AND INTERVIEW

From your 1983 story 'Fire Watch' to the novels *Blackout* and *All Clear*, you've frequently written about the London Blitz. What is it about this period that interests you?

I've been in love with the Blitz ever since eighth grade, when my teacher read aloud Rumer Godden's *An Episode of Sparrows*, about a little girl who makes a garden in the rubble of a church which had been bombed-out in the Blitz. When I went to England for the first time I especially wanted to see the tube stations where people had sheltered, and the shrapnel marks at the V&A Museum, and St Paul's. I'd read about the volunteer fire watch which had slept in the crypt during the day and guarded the roofs from incendiaries at night, and I couldn't wait to go up to the dome. When I did, it was a total letdown – nothing but modern gray concrete-block buildings and car parks on every side. Then I realized that was because every building around the cathedral had burned down, and that it was utterly impossible that St Paul's had survived.

From that moment on, I wanted to write about the fire watch and how they'd saved St Paul's, and I started reading everything I could about it. The more I found out about

the Blitz, the more there was to find out – and what had started as research for a story turned into an obsession which continues to this day.

Like the sinking of the *Titanic*, which I'm also obsessed with, the Blitz has everything – comedy, tragedy, irony and all of people's worst and best qualities on display. It's all of life – only compressed and intensified and heightened by the life-and-death nature of the situation.

Do you think the Blitz has been mythologized or romanticized too much, particularly in Britain?

On the contrary, I think that there's been an attempt in recent years to over-demythologize it and pretend the Blitz wasn't an extraordinary period in history. The thieves and cowards we always have with us; that kind of behaviour's to be expected. It's the heroes who are the miracle. Any way you spin it, the Blitz was full of heroes – vergers and choristers who put out incendiaries on St Paul's roofs, young girls and old men who drove ambulances and patrolled neighbourhoods in the middle of raids, aristocrats and servants who took in children, Thames paddle boat captains who went back to

Dunkirk time and again – under heavy fire – to rescue soldiers stranded on the beaches.

It really was Britain's finest hour. As Churchill said: "Everyone behaved splendidly." And managed to keep their sense of humour in the bargain – an even more remarkable feat. One reason I wrote the book was that I wanted to remind everybody of just how splendid they were. Well most of them, anyway.

In SE, travellers from the future usually remain 'different' from the 'contemps' because they know what's going to happen. That's something you deliberately take away from them during *Blackout*...

I think the hardest thing of all to do when you're writing about people in the past is to put yourself in their place. We know how it all turned out; we know Hitler didn't come rolling into London, but the Londoners living back then didn't. They'd just seen European cities flattened, armies surrendering, Germans marching down the Champs Elysee – and there was no reason to think it wasn't going to happen to them next.

I think that's one reason we like time travel stories; we can feel smug because

We're not talking some Douglas Adams-style 'stop when you get to the bottom of the page' so-called ending; Willis is too stringent an author for that. Yet, given that *Blackout* is a sufficiently large book – demanding a serious commitment, on the part of the reader, to its characters and recreation of the Home Front – then it's just a tad frustrating to be left on a cliffhanger – no matter how thematically apt it may be.

If you accept that this is just 'Part One', though, *Blackout* certainly has much to offer, from the scampish tricks of two evacuees to the growing sense that something is seriously going wrong with the whole time travel project – not only are researchers increasingly arriving days and miles out from where they're supposed to arrive, but it slowly becomes clear – to the readers, if not the characters themselves – that, contrary to their theories, it is possible for Oxford's historians to affect the history they're visiting – with potentially horrendous consequences for their own present. Roll on part two!

BY PAUL F. COCKBURN

we know who won at Trafalgar and Gettysburg, what happened to Julius Caesar and Archduke Ferdinand. It gives us a feeling of security and superiority that we know how it all came out. Which is never a good thing. Wars are only won and the world is only saved till the next time – and nothing lasts forever.

It also occurred to me, over the course of writing my time travel books, that the notion of my sending people to the past and of that not changing anything – when history is so clearly a chaotic system, with events constantly balancing on a knife's edge – was the height of arrogance!

As a professed lover of the short story, was it a challenge to devise such a large two-book narrative?

Writing this book nearly killed me: partly because, except for *Doomsday Book*, which has two main characters, the only multi-viewpoint thing I've ever done was a novella, 'Just Like the Ones We Used to Know'; partly because, halfway through, I changed the ending and had to write it all over again.

It took me eight years. For most of that time – up until the last few weeks, actually – it looked like it was going to kill me,



and then they'd hire somebody horrible to finish it.

I now plan to write a bunch of short stories, which I love, and then start on my Roswell novel, a romantic comedy about UFOs, alien abduction and Las Vegas. It only has one viewpoint, and I've already figured out the ending.

Should we read *Blackout* before *All Clear* or do the two books operate on their own?

Blackout and *All Clear* are one book; it was just too long for my publishers to bring out as a single volume. The two shouldn't be read independently. I talked to a guy once who'd picked up "the oddest book" in an airport newsstand. He said it sort of started midway through the story and then just ended abruptly. He then told me it was called *The Two Towers* – the middle volume of *The Lord of the Rings*. I can't

even imagine how he made any sense of it, though he said he sort of liked it.

I hope *Blackout's* readers will read *All Clear* too; and I'd like to apologise to everybody for the books being so long. If it's any comfort, it used to be three volumes!

You're known for the whimsy and humor that emerge from your narratives, be that in terms of character or situation. Is that how you see the world?

I've always thought the world was a hilarious place – except for a period of eight years there, which I'm still not certain Americans are going to survive – and it's much easier for me to see the ironic side of things than the earnest side. That's why I hate the musical *Cats* and love Shakespeare and romantic comedies. One of the reasons I love science fiction is because it's one of the few places I can write romantic comedy.

There was a rumour going around for a while that there were two Connie Willises – one who wrote comedy and one who wrote more ‘serious’ stuff. I don’t personally see any divide. Shakespeare managed to have comedy in even his most fraught plays – Polonius is actually quite a funny old bore and there’s an element of farce to a busybody getting himself stabbed while hiding behind a curtain eavesdropping. Shakespeare’s comedies are actually quite serious; Viola has to disguise herself as a boy because she’s in enemy territory, while Malvolio’s “I’ll be revenged on the lot of you” is about as serious as it gets.

The Second World War was deadly serious, but it had lots of funny moments, too – British Intelligence inflating rubber tanks to fool Hitler, evacuated slum kids wreaking havoc on the bucolic countryside, London shopkeepers putting up signs in their blown-out windows that read, “You should see our branch in Berlin!” – and there were transcendent moments even in the midst of possible death and destruction. I wanted to capture both the fun and the horrors of that time – and of every time.

Why is science fiction important to you?

It confronts the question of how to be human in the modern world, and has the courage to deal with science and technology – the two great realities of our time – directly and in depth.

An even greater quality is its ability to make us look at ourselves. Rod Serling spent years writing teleplays too controversial to produce. Then he began writing and producing the ‘harmless’ science fictional *Twilight Zone* – where he wrote episodes about racial prejudice, nuclear disarmament, politicians, and the nastier side of human behaviour. He successfully fooled television executives and the unwary viewer; he got them past their prejudices and preconceived notions so they could see things in a whole new light.

Doing stories about sign-language-speaking apes and the Blitz also makes it possible for me to get past my own prejudices and certainties, to get past what I think I think about something to what I really think.

I think science fiction’s important simply because no one takes it seriously. Everyone thinks it’s children’s literature or video-games-in-print or harmless escapism. Which means that, just like Miss Marple, we’re constantly underestimated and ignored – and in a great position to do all kinds of subversive stuff.



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Blackout (2010)
All Clear (Autumn 2010)

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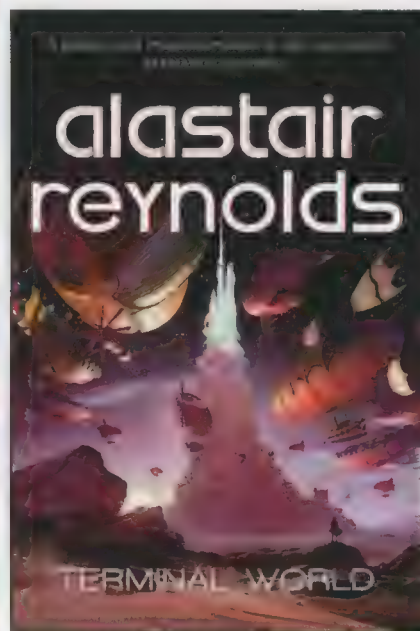
Fire Watch (1984)
Impossible Things (1993)
Even the Queen & Other Short Stories (1998)
Miracle & Other Christmas Stories (1999)
The Winds of Marble Arch & Other Stories (2007)

HUGO AWARDS

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‘The Last of the Winnebagos’ (novella, 1989)
Doomsday Book (novel, 1993)
‘Even the Queen’ (short story, 1993)
‘Death on the Nile’ (short story, 1994)
‘The Soul Selects Her Own Society: Invasion and Repulsion: A Chronological Reinterpretation of Two of Emily Dickinson’s Poems: A Wellsian Perspective’ (short story, 1997)
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‘The Winds of Marble Arch’ (novella, 2000)
‘Inside Job’ (novella, 2006)
‘All Seated on the Ground’ (novella, 2008)

For more information, and links to videos of Connie reading from *Blackout*, please visit ConnieWillis.net

Photograph by Cordelia Willis



TERMINAL WORLD

Alastair Reynolds

Gollancz, 496pp, £18.99 hb

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

If I say that *Terminal World* feels mechanistic, I’m not talking about the steampunk influence claimed for it by its publicity, nor indeed for the variety of technologies that feature in the novel. Instead, I’m talking about the way it feels as though the main characters are being moved around a factory, picked off one conveyor belt, placed on another, on a mysterious journey that brings them back to precisely where they began. Almost every aspect of the novel feels somehow inevitable, and there are few if any surprises along the way.

The novel begins on Spearpoint, possibly the last city left on a far-future Earth. No one really knows what lies in the world beyond because, for most people, Spearpoint is their world. It’s not one city but many. More than that, thanks to the presence of mysterious zones of influence, each neighbourhood has a distinctive character shaped by the technology that works within it. Coincidentally, the most technologically advanced cities are at the top of the tower, the Celestial Levels, which are inhabited by the posthuman angels, while the least advanced are at the bottom. Consequently, when Quillon is obliged to make a hasty departure from Spearpoint, his descent from Neon Heights, its technology mostly familiar to us, provides Reynolds with the opportunity to describe

how technology changes from zone to zone, and the ways in which people improvise, all of which he does with great relish.

Beyond Spearpoint, the landscape becomes almost entirely conjectural, its inhabitants ranging from the almost feral Skullboys to the quasi-military air force of the Swarm, not forgetting the carnivorous cyborgs that feed on brains and cannibalise humans and each other. Everyone is fighting for survival and strangers are not welcome. Quillon, a modified angel, is fleeing his former masters because of knowledge he supposedly has buried deep in his brain. Outside Spearpoint, he is safe, but has no purpose other than to wander around with his guide, Meroka, bumping, one by one, into all the dangers she's previously mentioned to him. The landscape is so empty, every encounter is inevitably imbued with significance. A chance meeting with a mysterious tattooed woman and her daughter, who seems to possess unusual powers, and the subsequent capture of all four by the Swarm, means the sharp reader can already make a guess at what is likely to happen. The only surprise lies in precisely how the issue will be resolved, and often there isn't that much of a surprise.

It's impossible to tell whether this neatness is intentional, or whether Reynolds, having created his landscape and his characters, was at a loss as to what to do with them. Strikingly, much of the real action – the effect of the catastrophic zone shifts on Spearpoint being the most obvious example – happens off-stage because Quillon is always the viewpoint, and he's not there when it happens. I am sorry not to see what Reynolds would have made of that. There are flashes of the energy that drives the big sequences in the Revelation Space trilogy – I'm thinking in particular of a very dramatic airship battle, and an extraordinarily moving sequence when the Swarm flies over a graveyard of thousands of aircraft, reflecting the desperate efforts, over many years, of the inhabitants of a dead city to escape.

I've enjoyed Alastair Reynolds' previous novels immensely. I like the characters in this novel, I like the settings, but the story frustrates me. In the end, *Terminal World* reminds me of nothing so much as one of those children's toys that work by string: you pull it all the way out to set it going, and as the toy runs down it winds the string all the way back into itself. This may or may not be appropriate, given the nature of the story, but I am not sure it should be considered a desirable feature.



GEOSYNCHRON
David Louis Edelman
Pyr, 500pp, \$16 tpb

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

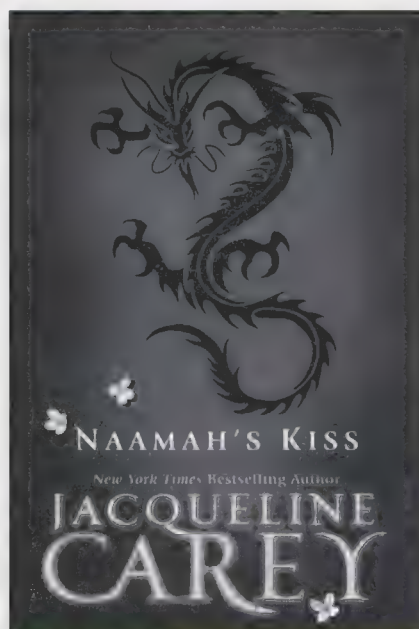
So here's the situation. The Revolt of the Autonomous Minds pretty much tore the old world apart and spelled the end of the old nation states. In the confusion they leave behind, a genius called Sheldon Surina develops a whole new branch of technology, bio/logics, by which people incorporate into their body all sorts of programs that can make them smarter or faster or change the colour of their eyes and so on. This, of course, makes Surina mega-rich and he also founds a dynasty which seems to throw up a new genius every generation or so who develops another technological marvel, such as teleportation. Throughout all this, and through a series of political upheavals, the Surinas manage to hold onto their company, their intellectual property rights and their wealth with a grip that a company like Cadbury's might well envy. But now it is some 360 years later and the latest Surina genius, Margaret, has another world-changing invention on her hands, Multi-Real, which she immediately hands over to the newest and least reliable fief-corp in the business, headed up by a duplicitous little chiseller called Natch. Now all Natch really knows is how to wheel and deal, so he has no idea what to do with this sudden gift, except he has to keep it out of the hands of the ineffectual democratic government, the militaristic

Defence and Wellness Council, and a rival with a private army who wants to kill Natch.

And that is roughly where we are when the third volume of the Jump 225 trilogy opens. In *Infoquake*, Edelman built up Natch as a super-competent anti-hero, building up a fief-corp that is more than the sum of its parts, and triumphing over evil Len Borda of the Defence and Wellness Council. In *MultiReal*, he brought it all crashing down, with Natch losing control of his fief-corp and being kidnapped by his rival, Brone, who manages to get access to Multi-Real; his deputy, Jara, finding herself way out of her depth; and Len Borda's ambitious lieutenant, Magan Kai Lee, seemingly leading the Defence and Wellness Council to victory. Plot it on a graph, and the rise and fall of the various characters follows almost precisely the archetypal pattern that so many trilogies display. So it is hardly surprising that this final volume opens with the good guys at their lowest ebb and gradually traces their ultimate upwards climb.

What is surprising is how comprehensively Edelman changes the character of his leading players. What made Natch fascinating in *Infoquake* was the fact that he was self-serving, cheating, and playing the business game to win; all of a sudden here he is selfless and noble, single-handedly clearing out the drug gangs in the orbital station where he is supposedly hiding out. The dark, mysterious and threatening Magan Kai Lee, meanwhile, is now in open revolt against Len Borda and turns out to be on the side of the good guys. In other words, I don't believe: I don't believe the basic situation, and I don't believe the characters. Then, when Brone starts to behave like the mustachio-twirling villain in a film melodrama, going on about his cleverness long enough for the good guys to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, you recognise exactly what sort of schematic novel we're in.

But of course, melodramas like this don't trade on believability, they trade on pace and adventure, on breathless escapades, sudden bursts of violence, unexpected reversals, and in all of this Edelman is superb. And he twists the pattern enough (the good guys aren't necessarily the ones we should be cheering, and between the lines this is not exactly the unalloyed lauding of market capitalism that it sometimes seems to be) to keep the whole thing fresh and interesting. You'll enjoy *Geosynchron*, just don't expect to believe it.



NAAMAH'S KISS
Jacqueline Carey
Gollancz, 656pp, £10.99 hb

Reviewed by Lawrence Osborn

With *Naamah's Kiss* Jacqueline Carey returns to the world of her Kushiel's Legacy series. It is the first volume of a new trilogy, which will follow the fortunes of Moirin as she comes to terms with her magical powers and her connection with the deities of Terre d'Ange.

The story in this volume falls naturally into three parts. The first part introduces Moirin and outlines her childhood on the island of Alba. Gradually she discovers her magical gifts and her connection with the gods of her father's people. Her first love affair ends in tragedy. Soon after that she undergoes a coming of age ritual, during which she is accepted as a true child of the Maghuinn Dhonn (the bear goddess of her mother's people) but at the same time effectively exiled.

Knowing that her destiny lies overseas, Moirin leaves Alba to seek her father in Terre d'Ange. On arrival she is rapidly accepted into Angeline society becoming the mistress of Raphael de Mereliot – the Queen's favourite – and then the lover of Queen Jehanne herself. Here she meets the man destined to become her teacher, the Ch'in sage Lo Feng. Through Raphael she meets a group of occultists and becomes involved in their attempts to summon fallen angels.

In the third part, Lo Feng is recalled to Ch'in to heal a princess and avert a civil war.

Moirin goes with him and plays a crucial role in that enterprise – helping to free the dragon trapped within the princess and using her magic to suppress knowledge that could spell disaster worldwide. At the same time, she becomes involved in two more love affairs, with the princess and Lo Feng's assistant, Bao. Her separation from Bao at the end of the novel provides the departure point for the next volume in the trilogy.

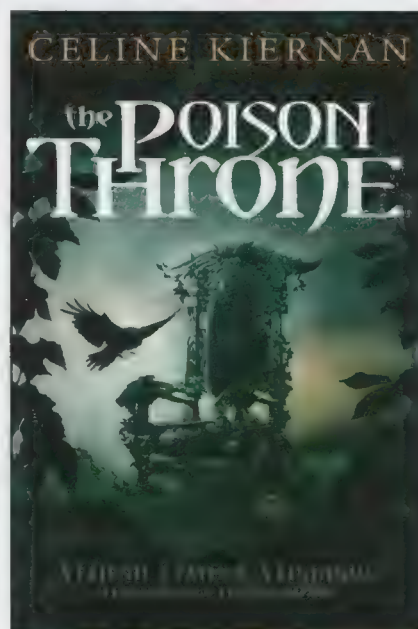
In the previous Kushiel novels, Carey created a complex alternative medieval Earth centred on Terre d'Ange. Riffing on the Judaeo-Christian tradition, she has envisaged a world in which a group of angels have become the gods and goddesses of Terre d'Ange. *Naamah's Kiss* adds a pagan/druidic element in the Alba section and a faux Chinese background for the Ch'in section. Perhaps inevitably, these suffer by comparison with the much more developed mythology of the central Angeline section.

Like the earlier novels, this is a first person narrative – Moirin's, in this case. Moirin is an engaging but indecisive character. She can't give up her first love; exile is forced upon her. In Terre d'Ange she allows herself to be manipulated by Raphael into more than one life-threatening situation and only Jehanne's intervention saves her. Throughout she comes across as more reactive than active. I can only hope that her quest to be reunited with Bao will lead to greater decisiveness in the next volume.

Since Moirin has a connection with Naamah, the goddess of desire, the novel contains a fair number of explicit sex scenes which are well-written but rather too frequent. On more than one occasion when I wanted the plot to move on, Moirin jumped into bed instead.

Carey's writing is generally clear and attractive. However, I was occasionally annoyed by the overuse of certain words and phrases. For example, in one sample of 20 pages the adjective 'nice' is used to describe everything from food and drink to jewellery and sex! I was also irritated by the way she scatters random archaisms (eg 'betimes', 'mayhap', 'wroth') through the text.

In sum, this is a well-written fantasy of a fairly traditional kind (apart from the sex) – young woman of humble origins but with remarkable gifts is raised to a position of great influence and goes on a quest during which she helps to save the world. In spite of its connections with the previous novels, it can be read and enjoyed without first having read its predecessors.



THE POISON THRONE
Celine Kiernan
Orbit, 475pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Ian Sales

In a modern fantasy novel, which is paramount: plot or world? Given the popularity of secondary world fantasies, and modern readers' preference for immersion, it would seem the answer is world. Yet even the most interesting secondary world needs a reason to visit it, or it would be nothing more than a role-playing game supplement. *The Poison Throne*, a debut novel by Irish writer Celine Kiernan, and the first book of the Moorehawke trilogy, manages to fail in both areas.

The trilogy takes place in an invented version of Europe, referred to throughout as 'the Europes'. *The Poison Throne* itself is set in an unnamed country which occupies much of the south of France. But this is merely geography. The country's culture is generic mediaeval England-inspired Fantasyland – with a King Jonathon, and a cast of characters with mostly English names. There is one non-English character, Razi, one of the book's central three. He is a 'Musulman' from 'the Moroccos', but Kiernan makes no effort to distinguish his culture or religion from the others. Another of the central trio, Christopher, is a native of the Duchy of Hadra which, despite its non-Germanic name, occupies the Low Countries. There was also no Moorish invasion of Spain, which in the trilogy is known as 'The Gibaltars' – except

Gibraltar is Arabic, from Jebel Tareq. There is too much of the real world in the world of *The Poison Throne* to prevent true immersion, too many details which do not gel or fit, ready to trip a reader.

The third, and most important, member of the central trio is Wynter Moorehawke, a fifteen-year-old carpenter's apprentice and daughter of the Lord Protector, himself also a carpenter. *The Poison Throne* is her story. She and her father have returned to King Jonathon's castle, only to find the kingdom in turmoil. The royal heir has been banished, and Razi, the king's bastard half-Arabic Musulman son, has been elevated to heir. The king is behaving like a mad despot, and everyone is now racist and intolerant.

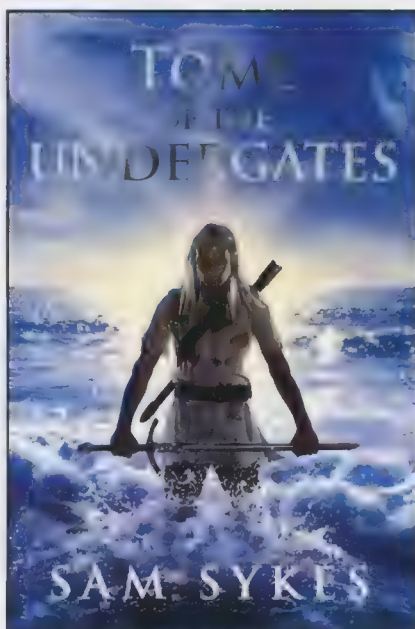
Unfortunately, the plot suffers from a gaping hole at its heart. The kingdom is now as it is because of 'The Bloody Machine'. While references to this appear throughout the text, no explanation of its nature does. But a secondary world fantasy is *not* a mystery – the engine of its plot carries the reader through the world of the story. For a mystery novel, it is the solution to the mystery which drives the plot. Along the way are hints and clues, allowing the reader to plan the journey ahead. *The Poison Throne* has no such clues, it has no map to its story. It makes for an intensely frustrating read.

The central triumvirate of Wynter, Razi and Christopher are also intense. They emote like the cast of a television melodrama, and suffer mood swings on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis. *The Poison Throne* travels through its characters' emotional landscapes as much as it wanders aimlessly about its core mystery.

However, it's not all bad. The writing is polished throughout, and there are a number of well-drawn set-pieces. The fantastical element – mangling of Europe aside – comprises talking cats and ghosts visible to all. They are nicely handled, and add an interesting spin to the story.

Given all this, it comes as little surprise to discover that *The Poison Throne* was first published in Ireland two years previously as a Young Adult novel. Orbit, however, have an offensive planned on the UK's fantasy market. The spine of the book features a logo reading "The Moorehawke Trilogy 1" and the ARC's back-cover has the comment "Three books in six months for guaranteed shelf domination."

I suspect fans of secondary world fantasies may not find much to their taste in *The Poison Throne*. Despite its packaging,



TOME OF THE UNDERGATES

Sam Sykes

Gollancz, 633pp, £18.99 hb

Reviewed by Mike Cobley

Say one thing about Sam Sykes, he's no Joe Abercrombie. Sure, there are similarities, a pre-tech medieval setting and a band of bickering adventurers going toe-to-toe against terrifying odds. But where Abercrombie deploys his narrative technique with the deadly finesse of a master tactician, Sykes unleashes a marauding mob of snarling brigands insanely intent on sabotaging each other while tearing off your face and puking on your shoes.

Let me explain.

Tome of the Undergates is about 190,000 words long and 633 pages wide, a demanding proposition for both writer and reader. Sykes kicks off in media res, dropping the reader down in the middle of a slaughter-tastic sea battle in which a band of fractious anti-heroes take part in a bloody attempt to repel waves of demented pirates. Interestingly, the battle against the pirates (and their big nasty captain; and the frogoid creatures and their bigger, nastier boss) stretches out for roughly 200 pages, during which we are introduced to Lenk, his merry band, and the withering contempt they have for each other. In fact, so corrosively compulsive is this shared enmity that often they'll stop in the middle of the action to snap, snarl and otherwise sneer at whoever happens to be around at the time.

That said, Sykes does give us a decent set

of distinct characters. There is Lenk, the leader, Kataria, a humanoid shict (handy with a bow), Denaos, a rogue, Dreadaeleon, a wizard, Asper, a healer, and Gariath, a reptiloid Dragonman in search of as violent a death as he can find. We get insights into their motivations, along with their flawed mental processes and the flaming rows they either set in motion or magnify by their misunderstanding or just plain bloody-mindedness. Which happens a lot.

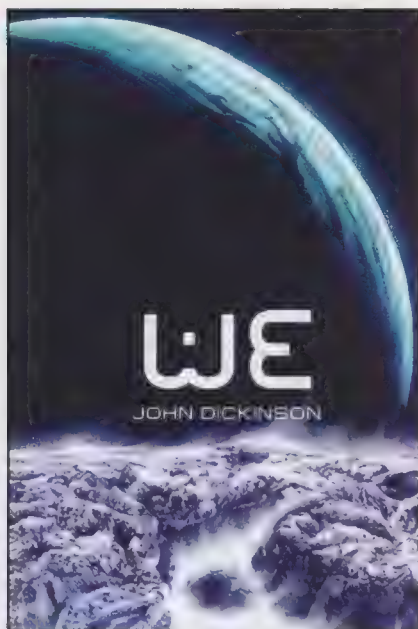
For me the soap-like back-biting and quarrelling soon became tedious and detracted from the pace of the narrative. There were another couple of prose elements which proved problematic, one being said-bookisms where an author uses words like snarled, roared, grumbled, growled, sighed, gurgled and hissed instead of 'said'. Using all these menagerie words is like bellowing through a megaphone, imposing on the reader a specific melodramatic highlight rather than having the effect arise naturally out of the dialogue and the context.

The other main problem has to do with descriptions and similes. Here are just two examples: "Her frown grew so heavy that it threatened to fall off her face and splash into the murk." (p 419); "A breeze sang across the sea, heavy with waking warmth. As if possessed of a sense of humour all its own, it pulled their long hair up into the sky, strands of silver and gold batting playfully at each other." (p 410)

Speaking personally, those aren't the kind of images and similes I would have chosen, and as a reader I found that they stopped me dead. I may be wrong: they may impress some with a certain cadence and lyricism but I'm just not getting it.

In other places Sykes does excel at fights, battle scenes and all manner of gut-wrenching, although occasionally there's a bit too much lip-smacking detail. Sometimes I wished he would dial it back from 11 to about 8 but it was not to be. And in addition to the abundant viscera there are bodily fluids aplenty, a cornucopia of chunder and barf and a good hogshead of pee.

But ultimately, *Tome of the Undergates* lacks conciseness and restraint, in description, scene length and characterization. The opening 200-page pirate battle makes the book feel lopsided, and the series of character introspections at the end creates a flat anticlimax. Yet I'm sure that many readers will enjoy reading it in the months to come. Opinions as to its merits, however, may remain divided.

**WE****John Dickinson**

David Fickling Books, 302 pp, £10.99 tpb

Reviewed by Duncan Lunan

The second capital in the title is not an accident. In his afterword, John Dickinson acknowledges a debt to Yevgeny Zamyatin, of whose 1924 *We* he was initially unaware, but which he credits with highlighting "the place of the individual in the larger group, which is of course the meat of all dystopian fiction".

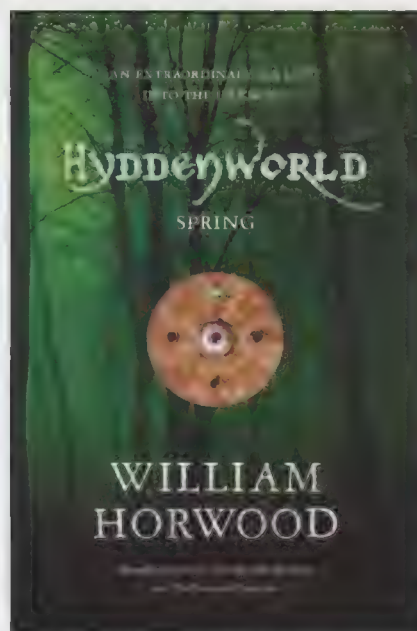
In this novel *WE* is the World Ear, a computer net into which all humans are integrated, to the extent that their mental and physical wellbeing is constantly monitored and adjusted. The one exception from *WE* is an outpost on an icy moon of a giant planet 4.5 billion km from the Sun, where communications with Earth are periodically interrupted by the planet's magnetotail, so those interruptions and the timelag make the link untenable. The station's communications expert has committed suicide, so a replacement must be sent from Earth to investigate the problem. The chosen expert, Paul Munro, is in a long-term relationship with a partner who's expecting his child, and the dangers of the mind-machine link are nowhere made more apparent than when they receive news of the mission. "She was not looking at him. She was looking at the floor with her face furrowed. Already the rising stress in her body had triggered the therapy routines she relied on. The images she sent back were dark and fragmented.

He saw, rather than received, her sense of loss and bewilderment: the sudden, gaping uncertainty of a future without him; her fears for the child that would know no father. For him it had not outweighed the immense force of the proposal from headquarters..." He leaves her without further thought, and she will be 'cured' and find another partner, all through the routine operations of the World Ear for the good of its participants.

Munro is divorced from *WE* before leaving Earth, and the first part of the novel is dominated by his disorientation, subsequent alienation and sense of loss, from the machine net as well as from his unnamed partner. It's presumably to emphasise those that the planet is never identified as Neptune, nor the satellite as Triton, though of course they are. Inevitably this plot structure requires a slow pace and a lot of exposition as Munro overcomes his traumas, comes up to speed and meanwhile learns what the agendas of the other three people on the station are. The jacket calls *WE* "a thriller to freeze your blood" but it seems a long time before we get to physical action; even then, a couple of crawler trips to the moon's surface aren't all that thrilling, though the need to get back before the environment overcomes the vehicles' resources does make for effectively rising tension each time.

I imagine it won't spoil anything for IZ readers if I reveal that the interference in the magnetotail is the product of nonhuman intelligence. Searching for extraterrestrial intelligence is one of the *WE*'s highest priorities, and Lewis, the leader of the outcast group, attributes that to loneliness: *WE* can't interact socially with individual humans and needs to find a counterpart. However, Neptune is too close and Lewis believes that *WE* can only see ET or any independent entity within the Solar System as a threat or a target for assimilation, as in Brian Aldiss's *The Eighty-Minute Hour* or with *Star Trek*'s Borg.

I find the issues very interesting, since I've argued elsewhere that the human race is mad with loneliness as it is, and the fixation with radio SETI is a symptom of it. For an evolving hive-mind, the problem could be much greater. But because of the thriller format, at the end of the novel the big issues are unresolved: the rebellion on which the four humans on the station are embarking reminded me of an ending, long ago, to a *Sergeant York* episode: "Will they fight to the end?" "Yes – whatever that end may be."

**HYDDENWORLD: SPRING****William Horwood**

Macmillan, 325pp, £16.99 hb

Reviewed by Iain Emsley

William Horwood's new series, *Hyddenworld*, follows the familiar pastoral tone of his *Duncton Wood* series but it is somewhat less opaque.

Using moles in the previous series, he explored the forgotten mythical, learned land of Britain, travelling along its forgotten pathways whilst opposing the viscous tide of Industrialism. In this eagerly awaited novel, Horwood returns to, and extends, similar themes though the *Hyddenworld* series, spread over four volumes which will be published on the first day of each season.

Spring, naturally, begins the journey and Horwood perhaps has his work cut out to set up such a large canvas and create a volume which is still enjoyable to read in its own right. *Spring* reveals and revels in its own roots, where Horwood explores the wider nodes and interrelations of the alternate world.

Arthur Fowler, a disgraced professor of archaeology, believes in the presence of two worlds, a belief which led to his dismissal. His 'lunatic fringe' beliefs allow him to see the underlying *Hyddenworld*, a layer made from myth and legend. Although Horwood does not explore this 'outsider' aesthetic in *Spring*, it does echo *Duncton Wood*'s argument that the mythical world was in dire need of recovery. Aware of this, Arthur makes use of it in his own travels as

he learns to see his own world in a different way.

In the alternate Germany, the Hydden decide to hide one of their children in our current England to escape the sense of impending Doom and to recover the lost section of a Saxon brooch. The child, Jack, is made to forget his own heritage and language as he grows up. His resistance to our modern world is foreshadowed in a car accident which emphasises his link to Katherine (who he rescues), another one with roots in both worlds. Both children will develop into their roles as their journey continues.

As Jack comes of age, he sees the thinned world and is able to talk to the Peace Bringer, his own analogue and the person who created the brooch in the first place. He becomes more aware of the passing of time in both linear and cyclical fashions as each type of time inhabits a particular world.

Jack learns to straddle both worlds though, unlike Arthur, it is not so much a matter of belief in the world in question but in himself as a straddler. He recognises his place in both worlds, and as an archetype, but he also strives to become greater than the role. Katherine follows a similar path in that she realises that she must balance Jack's role as Peace Bringer by becoming the Shield Maiden.

As with writers like Robert Holdstock, Horwood brings the worlds alive, remaking the landscape with his mythological characters.

He not only makes the characters come alive but also uses older meanings of Doom in the Old English sense of fate. Horwood does not give a cod rage against fate but a sense of two children inexorably bound into a future; one that is not determined but depends upon the individual. Like Holdstock's *Mythago Wood* series, the *Hyddenworld* appears to explore what it means to be a storyteller.

Opposed to this is the cyclical motion of the seasons. Jack and the mythical world are keenly aware of the changing seasons. The *Dunton Wood* chronicles were tied into, and aware of, the natural world but *Hyddenworld* takes this to a new height. Horwood manages to begin defining his world and offering a way of encouraging the reader to do so. There is always a sense of him reusing and remaking older stories and revivifying them.

Clearly this is a more ambitious series and one where I'm already waiting eagerly for the subsequent volumes.



UNDER IN THE MERE
Catherynne M. Valente

Rabid Transit Press, 146pp, \$10 pb

Reviewed by Andrew J. Wilson

My four-year-old son told me a story while he played with his toys the other day: three million years ago, apparently, the Knights of Neptune stormed New York Castle and skirmished with laser beams... The Arthurian stories never lose their appeal and always lend themselves to reinvention.

Catherynne M. Valente's *Under in the Mere*, on the other hand, is a painfully self-conscious reimagining of the tales of the

Once and Future King. She quotes from the *Mabinogion*, Malory and Tennyson, and even acknowledges Steinbeck's unfinished *Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*, but strips all dignity from the characters and makes her only concession to nobility in her ostentatious prose.

This author sketches the protagonists as a dysfunctional family and tries the reader's patience with a battery of misery memoirs written in an artificial style. Much-loved figures are depicted as lunatics, perverts and rapists, and although *Under in the Mere* follows the general arc of the legends we know, the book is much less a cohesive novella than a collection of monologues with all the appeal of pompous out-of-town drunks haranguing the disinterested regulars of your local bar.

In 'A Reader's Manifesto', critic B.R. Myers argued that it's now fashionable "to exploit the license of poetry while claiming exemption from poetry's rigorous standards of precision and polish". According to Valente, mountains "grumble a loamy rhythm of longevity". That was news to me, but it does serve to illustrate the essential problems of her approach.

Any talent she has is dreadfully misapplied here, and despite the cute conceit of contemporary California being Avalon, the denigration of one culture's mythology by another leaves a nasty aftertaste.

I couldn't wait to finish *Under in the Mere* and get back to listening to my son's stories about his Knights of Neptune instead.

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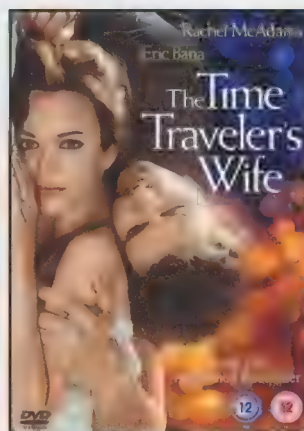
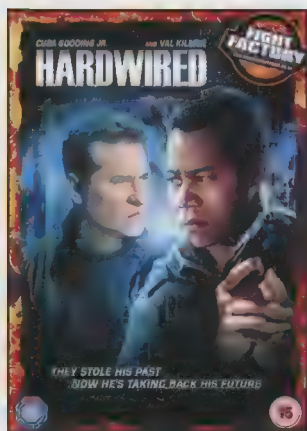
LASER FODDER TONY LEE

Remember Brit sci-fi phenomenon *Max Headroom*? That 1985 television movie (set "20 minutes into the future" where it's illegal to switch off your TV set!) was followed by an Americanised yet still fairly watchable cyberpunk series. **Hardwired** (DVD, 18 January), taps into *Max Headroom*'s techno-chiller paranoia about mega-corporate omniscience and corruption, and delivers some mildly satirical genre musings. What it lacks in narrative slickness due to moments of clumsy exposition or farcically timed info-dumps, it strives to make up for by repackaging more thought-provoking angles on SF tropes than were exploited for overblown *Eagle Eye* and witless *Gamer*. Its plot concerns car crash survivor Luke (Cuba Gooding Jr, *Chill Factor*) getting a free 'psi-com' brain implant, which saves his life but erases his memories, leaving him open to human experiments (holo-ads streamed into conscious mind) by bad guys of hi-tech chip-maker Hope Industries, and vulnerable to emotional manipulations by identikit young cipher-punks – led by genre favourite Michael Ironside, willing to turn amnesic victim into vengeful hero (Luke's ex-special forces, of course!) for their anti-corporate cause. Video-link exec Val Kilmer looks determined to have a very bad hair day. HUD texts from rebel hackers inform/direct action scenes, including a map-guided 'blind' gunfight which neatly parodies first-person-shooter games. Competent director Ernie Barbarash (*Cube Zero*, *They Wait*) reflects on Michael Crichton's oeuvre, particularly *Terminal Man* (1974) and *Looker* (1981), and this is his most appealing and fun work to date. *Aliens* in-jokes (a salesman named Carter Burke; Lance Henriksen's mugshot on a billboard) don't conflict with the freewheeling story, and if the open-ended coda suggests this feature was intended to be the pilot for a futuristic TV series, that's okay if any spin-off entertains like this.



TV movie **Thrill Seekers** (aka: *The Time Shifters*, 1999) is re-released on DVD, 25 January. As formula sci-fi of *Timescape* (aka: *Disaster In Time*, 1992) meets *Timecop* (1994),

it combines Kuttner and Moore's *Vintage Season* notion of time-tourism that makes watching disasters inhumanly trendy, with standard action heroics inspired by Verheiden and Randall's comic-book series. Reporter Tom Merrick (Casper Van Dien, *Starship Troopers*) teams up with tabloid researcher Elizabeth (Catherine Bell, *JAG*, 2005's TV mini-series *The Triangle*), to discover the truth about a 'mystery man' (British actor Julian Richings) photographed at historical tragedies. Incredulously, Tom sees this strange chap on a plane, and prevents a mid-air collision of airliners, prompting intervention by 'chronology protection' agents Felder (Peter Outerbridge, *ReGenesis*) and Cortez (Theresa Saldana). Martin Sheen video-phones in (from whenever) guest-star overacting (sorry, performance), while suspected 'hijacker' Tom and 'accomplice' Liz are pursued by disbelieving FBI, with lives at stake from anticipated subway train wreck and stadium blaze. Suspense and horror is predicated on reset-button options as essential plot-twist requirements. Disregarding public safety, timeline sabotage to change the future and save loved ones, forms the crux of this movie's familiar science fictional moral dilemma, with reversal of misfortune and a final crisis solved easily by the hero's irrational belief in subgenre clichés.





Materialising unexpectedly amidst a minor cycle of stylised temporal mysteries, **The Time Traveler's Wife** (DVD/Blu-ray, 8 February) is romantic sci-fi with its slush factor dialled up towards a tragic delirium. Sandra Bullock vehicle *The Lake House* (2006), itself a remake of Korean film *Siworae* (2000), might be the first blip of this cinematic time-scope's phase or fad, while Darren Aronofsky's insipidly pretentious *The Fountain* (2006) and David Fincher's romanticised melancholy of anticlockwise living in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) brought outsider characters into the mix of genre conventions, before middling Brit pub comedy *FAQ About Time Travel* (2009) lowered the tone. Instead of provoking humour from its paradox narrative, or searching for philosophical insights into existential human distress, director Robert Schwentke and screenwriter Bruce Joel Rubin turn Audrey Niffenegger's debut novel into a weepie-plus-quirks that harks back to Jeannot Szwarc's 1980 movie of

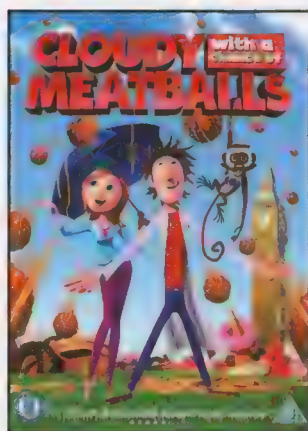
Richard Matheson's *Somewhere in Time*. Our troubled protagonist Henry (Eric Bana, *Hulk*) is 'unstuck in time', and he flits back and forth – like Billy Pilgrim in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (filmed in 1972 by George Roy Hill). Frequently both concerned observer and active participant in his nonlinear lifetime, Henry's disjointed story is so crowded with heartbreaking clichés of untimely departures (interrupted courtship, 'alternative' wedding, missing husband, absentee father), and bittersweet ephemeral temporality (momentary happiness, inevitably fragmented relationships), that poor Henry starts talking about himself in the third person. But the poignancy of SF logic is merely an illusion. There's very little sincere consideration given to, never mind a deeper contemplation of, time-slip phenomenon as formidable challenge to freewill, or this particular time traveller's apparently predetermined existence of situational ethics and inescapable yet accidental death. Sob!



Nowadays, I think filming in black-and-white is often unforgivably pretentious, and the 'style' is only really acceptable/most

palatable in old movies, especially classic or classy noir thrillers made before I was born. However, I find that television shows in b&w are quite unwatchable today (even those monochrome narrative flashbacks in *Heroes* are boring for me!), whether they are widely considered to be classics, or not.

The Avengers Series Three (DVD, 15 February) is a box set of seven discs, with 26 episodes that were first broadcast in 1963–64, when Patrick Macnee's dapper spy John Steed was partnered with Cathy Gale (Honor Blackman). Sample episode, *Man With Two Shadows*, sees Cathy confront Steed's evil double to thwart a sinister plot about doppelganger agents replacing government officials, and this has particular relevance for SF fans. *November Five* concerns political assassination and nuclear terrorism on bonfire night and it predates *V For Vendetta* by a generation. Overly talky TV playlets filmed on minimal sets, the low-budget production values here contrast with polished merits of *The New Avengers* (1976–77), revealing a sea change in basic standards of TV programmes a decade later. Series four (due for DVD release 3 May) of *The Avengers* was the first to co-star Diana Rigg as Emma Peel, while plots regularly explored more outrageously far-fetched aspects of telefantasy. But it wasn't until the fifth series that *The Avengers* was filmed in colour (securing lucrative sales to American TV markets), which, somewhat regrettably, consigned previous years of antiquated b&w spy-fic TV to that strange foreign country of the best-forgotten past.



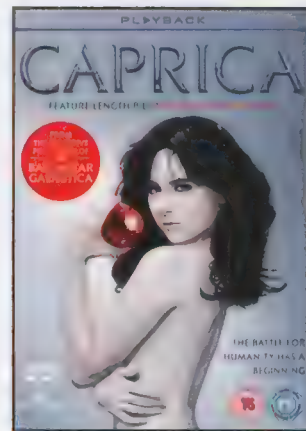
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Moscow 2013, apparently... Incursion of Lovecraftian creature from gloom dimension wreaks urban terrorism. A mysterious organisation clashes with vigilante group 'Stop Crime' (oh, how original!), prompting action men (hollow props, not solid characters) into slick ballistic and vehicular mayhem while thorny alien tentacles (freaky bio-tech design?) concern futuristic mages in a bland shiny ghost realm. "Centre of the temple is the corrector of consciousness." Okay, I'll put the kettle on. A novice director's first film, *Zapreshchennaya realnost* is released as **The Interceptor** (DVD/Blu-ray, 22 February), and it's something to do with 21st century agents of Smersh (trans. "death to spies") kung fu fighting against charmless Bond type baddies in *Matrix*-influenced stunts. It struggles to imitate Hollywood or Eurasian sci-fi blockbusters while erasing any trace of Russian culture or social mores.

There's knife throwing in bullet time and psychotronic or psychotropic weapons and big explosions that are frequent enough to keep you awake in the dark. However, this is all surface and has no depth whatsoever. *The Interceptor* is colourless, humourless and uniformly lifeless. Attempting to follow a recent trend set by excellent Russian movies *Night Watch* and *Day Watch*, this fails because its makers rejected all the quiriness that distinguishes Bekmambetov's work from western counterparts. If you thought *Wanted* (2008) was mere empty spectacle, this glossy nonsense is much worse. Dialogues are tiredly glum. Acting is stiff enough to bend the performers into wire clothes hangers. Miraculously dull, *The Interceptor* just shuffles along stubbornly, in tune only with the droning synth of its rudimentary score. I have seen lots of shite, and now this... A movie which proves, once again, that you really can't polish a turd.

I'm not a fan of *The Incredibles* (2004), or *WALL-E* (2008) and its Pixar ilk, or those *Shrek* pictures, so Phil Lord and Christopher Miller's sci-fi comedy **Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs** (DVD/Blu-ray, 25 January), with its cartoony style CGI and Disneyfied 'plot' formula that's aimed resolutely at a 'family' audience, simply did not appeal to me at all. Shane Acker's animated fantasy **9** (DVD/Blu-ray, 22 February) is something altogether different, however, with 'dark science' design work for hessian-sack-puppet homunculi – vestigial humanity of varying size, intelligence and temper, in a searing post-holocaust world that's stalked by predatory mecha scavengers, and ravaged by seemingly poisonous dust storms. On the rescue quest for #2, fearless #9 leads other fabricated and numbered 'survivors' through a soulless wasteland ("Can I wait

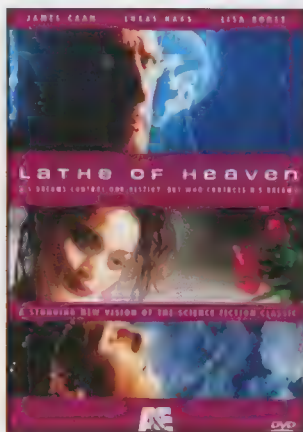


Feature-length pilot for planet-bound *BSG* spin-off prequel TV series, **Caprica** (DVD, 29 March) begins shamelessly with sex and violence club scenes to drag in the 'adult' viewers, before shift into hedonistic wallow of sci-fi soap variant 'Caprica Hills 90210' scenario. Aftermath of a terrorist attack (by religious nut, of course!) on maglev-train eventually segues into techno-fear scenario as autonomous avatar of dead girl (victim of suicide bomber) is copied from online backup as template for newly invented robot soldier. And so cylon race is created with monotheistic faith 'program' running in the background. *Wild Palms* (see *Interzone* #216) portrayed the cyberspace 'revolution' with more style and intrigue and visual pizzazz than is fielded here, but Esai Morales (*Jericho*) and Eric Stoltz (*Passion of Ayn Rand*) add value as Adama and Graystone patriarchs, and familiar 'toaster' effects are supplemented by new shmoo bot servants that help establish a comptrolled society ready for downfall. As the first instalment of an origin tale, this is necessarily driven towards a predictable cliff-hanger ending, but I think it's most affective as tragedy of how impressionable young minds (human and A.I.) are corrupted to antagonism by dogmatic strictures of a simplistic belief system.



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here?" murmurs timid #5), where the rag-doll hero finds talisman trigger for A.I. predator, and incautiously activates a giant robot (distractingly reminiscent of squid-bots from *The Matrix*). Avoiding the brain-drain fate claiming some new friends, our plucky 'stitch-punk' saviour 9 (voiced by ex-hobbit Elijah Wood) abandons the safety of a hidden sanctuary, returns to 'first room' of the dead scientist (voiced by curiously coincidentally named Alan Oppenheimer) and figures out how to switch off the lethal hunter/killer (without needing to invent weaponry or time travel *Terminator* style). Visually never anything less than impressive, this is a somewhat eerie fable of transhuman potentials, or another muddled sci-fi adventure that's probably too derivative for its own good, and is only as meaningful as an amnesiac's signature.



Was the great *Donnie Darko* just a fluke? Richard Kelly's follow-up movie *Southland Tales* was an interesting failure, and **The Box** (DVD/Blu-ray, 19 April) simply over-expands the fascinating domestic intrigues of Richard Matheson's short story 'Button, Button' (previously adapted for a TV episode of *Twilight Zone* anthology series 1985–89) into a somewhat absurdist NSA and NASA conspiracy to deal with weird 'magic' tech of an extraterrestrial policing action. The nonsensical plot derives in part from Kelly's own childhood (his father worked on Viking project), but the 1970s' period setting seems tangential, and certainly unnecessary, to a genre scenario with 'pod people' allusions and *X-Files* riffs. Fatally, it attempts to explain quasi-occult mysteries of the 'button box', with promised windfall reward and death-of-a-stranger challenge, by proposing absolute morality of ethical checks and melodramatic balances for universal order. It has a few uncanny moments and paranormal events but Kelly's sci-fi concoction does not convince overall. Aliens might well be interested in our species, but why on Earth would they care about individuals? With co-star Frank Langella's facial disfigurement registering less horrific visual impact than a similar CGI'd visage in *Dark Knight*, this lightning-strike survivor's characterization settles for man-in-black UFOlogy theme with 'scar tissue of the gods' appeal. All things considered, then, the modest *Twilight Zone* version was far superior drama.

BACKLIST

A lucky few have seen the 1980s TV movie (with Bruce Davison, directed by Fred Barzyk and David Loxton) based upon Ursula Le Guin's fascinating 1971 classic novel but the **Lathe of Heaven** (2002) remake is perhaps even less well known than the previous version as, currently, only the region one DVD import is available. Shying away from a full-scale adaptation of the book, director Philip Haas (*Angels & Insects*, *Music of Chance*) opts for artistic subtlety and psychological drama. 'Lost boy' and drug addict George Orr (Lukas Haas, *Mars Attacks*) is remanded to psych therapy – while "trying not to dream" – and he volunteers for hypnosis treatment by Dr Haber (James Caan) with brain scan/biofeedback machine. Changes to reality caused by George's power dreams are unsettling and frightening but never momentous or drastic, and this film lacks attendant philosophy of the original storyline. Picture this: Lady Godiva, hot to trot. Counsellor/advocate Heather (Lisa Bonet, *Angel Heart*, *New Eden*) attends one couch session when George voices 'invasion of privacy' concerns while under Haber's care, but manipulative shrink still gets high-rise office with mountain views (as befits his upscale career shift)

in George's next edit of an alternative world. Overpopulation solved by viral pandemic eases the congestion of subway travel. Heather's appearance in George's life switches roles, changing jobs along with futuristic fashions and décor, but the 'chaos' wrought by Dr Haber's tinkering with George's lucid dreaming avoids the 'broken' physics and extraterrestrial visitors (although blue aliens can be spotted in a mural), which previously defined *Lathe of Heaven* as genre classic. Loss of outré SF elements tends to leave us – viewers and characters alike – with bouts of déjà vu, but no memory of 'the good old days', in many more ways than one. Picture this: waking up from sleep in different clothes/room/parallel world, again. Social anarchy only prompts a martial law crackdown, and the new daze rolls on. Often enigmatic, this understated chiller, where changing the present unravels the past, focuses upon the romantic quantum entanglements between George and the variable Heather. Despite abandoning much of the inventive weirdness from both novel and first TV film, this mature revision still provides compelling entertainment. It should be welcomed as a remarkable departure from the norm where genre media is largely unsophisticated sci-fi action/horror, with explosions and monsters in assorted childish excitements.

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MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE



Even now, with the world in its pocket and IMAX showings booked solid for months to come, **Avatar** looks anything but a sure thing. It's a gift of a film to chortle at, from *South Park's* Dances with Smurfs to Peter O'Toole's blue-arsed Barbie dolls chasing rubber turkeys (even if the cryptic second half of this still has one faintly wondering what was sloshing around in his glasses). If you think the dialogue sometimes slips now and again into the risible, be thankful the Trudy/Norm secondary romance was awkwardly excised in its entirety in post, quite likely for precisely this reason. As a vision of an alien world fifteen years in the making, it's all just a little bit too actor-friendly to convince, the Na'vi phonology a little too speakable, their bodies a little too fairylike and sparkly. And yet, this first sf film since *ET* to top the all-time charts is a genuinely momentous work, in ways that even its most obsessive repeat visitors may not fully be seeing. James Cameron's latest triumphant folly has sunk its roots deep into the cinematic tree of souls, quite deliberately ransacking the back catalogue of all terrestrial and extraterrestrial cinema to composited a narrative about desire for new worlds fulfilled, in dreams of flying you never have to wake up from: a transcendent future existence where colours are brighter, experience more vivid, the gravity of earthbound things lighter; where colonial wars are winnable by the preindustrial indigenes, sexual union is monogamous and forever, and not only does God exist but She has free unlimited plug-in-and-go broadband.

Obviously the spectacle contributes. Cameron has been using and pushing *Avatar's* key technologies of digital

worldmaking, 3D and IMAX for longer than any of his peers, and has some good ideas about what 3D can do beyond the traditional poking and soaring: his camera wanders with calculated ease through a room full of see-through iPads, holographic data displays, and virtual terrain models that (in an artful touch of expensive throwaway comedy) don't quite scroll to the place you want. But while things like the battle sequence improve on repeated viewing, it's increasingly apparent that the digital characters only just work when they work at all, with only Zoë Saldana's Neytiri managing to pass muster most of the time. It's not clear that this is because her driver is a better performance-capture artist, or that the animation isn't shackled to a predigital human likeness, or that she's just had more resources spent on her; it may just be because her eyes are inexplicably bigger and more anime-like than everyone else's, in a film where Zemeckis dead-eye is still a pervasive affliction and characters can suddenly develop a disconcerting squint or loss of binocular focus just in the switch from one angle to another. Not surprisingly, the mime-workshop tribal mincing has its work cut out shifting some of the expressive load off the performers' underperforming digital phizzes. But Cameron's canniest move here has been to resist the siren lure of total immersivity, and instead to cut back and forth between digital and its human worlds as part of the dramatisation of the one's desire for the other. For all the enthusiasm professed for the nuance of performance capture, all the avatar cast are diminished by avatarisation and Sigourney Weaver's version just plain awful, while the supporting human-

only cast are actually the finest team of bare-armed Cameronian grunts since *The Abyss*. (It's now possible to see that Michelle Rodriguez' entire career has been basic training for field duty as a Cameron heroine.)

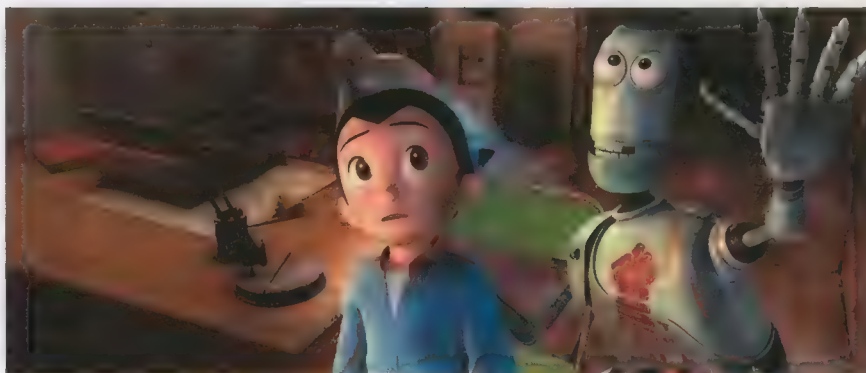
For a film so long developed and heavily resourced, in fact, it's disarming how many rough edges remain. The writing, even devotees would admit, is a long way from Cameron's best. (That was *Strange Days*, by a giant low-gravity Pandoran mile.) Never an enthusiastic completer of screenplays, Cameron is famous in the business for his distinctive use from *Terminator* onwards of "scriptments", extended narrative treatments with intermittent breaks into dialogue that may be as extensive as in *Strange Days*, but in the 1994 version of *Avatar* was entirely vestigial. These more or less formless early blueprints invariably have an energy and passion that the finished screenplay struggles to sustain; indeed, the story of Cameron's gradual disengagement from *Spider-Man* is told well enough in the decline of the successive screenplay drafts from his original scriptment, and the closeness with which David Koepp's draft for the Raimi version recreated Cameron's own discarded first instincts. And though the original *Avatar* scriptment crackled with angry political narrative energy, it was 2005 or -6 before a workable screenplay was finally wrung out of him, and even then a lot of material has been reworked in post. Already on first viewing you notice a lot of cuts and hasty back-shot voiceovering and journal-dumps. The tragedy of Grace's school is just one element that has been clumsily edited out, and you're right to wonder where Norm has got to during the final duel. The 1994 scriptment opened with an extended tour of Josh (as he then was) Sully's blighted Earth, which was down to five minutes by the time of the shooting script; but even that has gone in the final cut.

But then, what you actually see when you watch *Avatar* depends on your personal prescription lenses: *Pocahontas* and *Fern Gully*, or *Dune* and "The Word for World is Forest", or *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Dances with Wolves*, or Roger Dean and Rodney Matthews, or *Laputa* and *Princess Mononoke*, all the above, or more, and everything else besides. Some of the allusions are as in-your-face as the thumping references to "shock and awe" and "fighting terror with terror"; the Powhatan moment is particularly anxious that we appreciate the heavy dig in the ribs.

But some of it is probably unknown to its own perpetrator. It's a startling moment when the penny drops that Cameron has admired, and by the time of production is aware he's remaking, Terence Malick's *The New World* – but then why imagine he wouldn't? It's a tricky call, this influence thing. Last issue I made a whimsical quip about an imaginary unwritten novel that the far more imaginative Adam Roberts, ahead of all known games as usual, had in fact already published two months earlier. Big Jim has been careful to spread his debts and own no individual named works as inspiration aside from the public-domain John Carter (on whom, as it happens, Andrew Stanton is now toiling over at Pixar). But Cameron – who, let's not forget, is a trained physicist, NASA contractee and prominent Mars Undergrounder to whom scientific research is at least as important as the filmmaking he uses to fund it – grew up reading silver-age sf in the sixties, and it's as clear as the gas-giant eye of Polyphemus in the big Pandoran sky that the major sf template is *Dune*, even if he can't possibly admit it, particularly with a remake in the works. But then *Dune* was *Lawrence of Arabia*, and deep in the roots of Eywa every single thing ever is an avatar of everything else, so that strip-mining intellectual property for narrative unobtainium is a futile earthling fixation in a memetic biosphere where all things are Gaia and so are you with knobs on. That's not to deny that it's also a deeply Cameronian film, pulling together threads of obsession not just from all the films he's made, but from those he gave away to Bigelow and Soderbergh in the course of *Avatar*'s long gestation: the sentient planet of *Solaris*, which Cameron bought because he liked the living ocean; the virtual technology of transpersonal experience in *Strange Days*, written in a three-week white heat only a year before the original draft of *Avatar*. (And when you remember that he also did uncredited script work on *Point Break*, some of the aerial set pieces feel hauntingly familiar.) But then, of the nine films in this month's clutch, no fewer than four start from the premise of Earth's irreversible environmental (and in one case physical) destruction, and another two a threat to humanity's survival; three feature worlds above the clouds and a clash with surface-dwellers; three centre on disabled heroes; and three are about the absolute reality of God. Fifteen years ago, Jim Cameron already saw what we'd be watching in 2010, over and over. He's still scary.



The *Avatar* phenomenon must be a factor in the hasty UK release for the most striking of its immediate retro-clones, 2007 animation **Battle for Terra**, which sees a peaceloving planet of tree-dwelling sky people threatened with genocidal terraforming by the militarised survivors of Earth's destruction, with Luke Wilson's conflicted space marine and Evan Rachel Wood's freethinking native girl caught in the apocalyptic crossfire. An optimistic attempt at 3D spectacle filmmaking on a near-zero budget, originally made and screened in 2D and the 3D added subsequently for the 2009 wide release, its character design and animation cut every scissorable corner: heads are shaven, skin textures baby-smooth, and the natives live in elegant zen interiors in a treescape above the clouds (so none of that expensive jungle to render), with the planetary surface a barren and featureless snowscape under conveniently dense fog cover. It's an attractive enough aesthetic, and there's enough vertiginous soaring and X-wing dogfights to keep the stereoscopy feeling useful; but the earnest, wit-free script is painfully solemn, and both the humans and the sad-eyed indigenes look depressed even to be in it. It's hard to see the target audience being much entertained.



Brighter if not particularly better is **Astro Boy**, a digital reboot for Osamu Tezuka's babyfather of all anime icons at the hands of a Hong Kong team (credits are bilingual English/Cantonese) under the direction of *Flushed Away*'s David Bowers, and with Freddie Highmore voicing firepower-buttocked robotyke and Nicolas Cage his bereaved mad-scientist Gepetto. In this version of the origin story, boy genius Toby is tastefully vaporised in a *Robocop*-style misadventure when the military attempt to weaponise his father's clean-energy technology, only for his robot substitute to be cast out of sky-city heaven when he develops a personality of his own and a crisis of identity over being a dead child's avatar in a machine simulation of a body. But the child becomes a redeemer as he harrows the hellish scrapyard of Earth's surface, frees the orphans and the unplugged from bondage, and returns in glory to save Metro City from being stomped to bits by the author of his misery in a giant robot body powered by "adaptive technology", and wins his father's love for what he is. Like *Terra*, it makes some mildly amusing mischief with the laws of robotics in the service of a plea for inter-being understanding; but the attempt to forge an emotional power source from the narrative technology of parent-child angst would be a little more persuasive if more than one of the extensive child cast showed the slightest trace of a mother.



Relentless father-son business with a conveniently erased mom is presumably how a couple of London Ozzies got the Hollywood go-ahead to make **The Road**, a respectfully literal rendering of Cormac McCarthy's highly regarded post-apocalyptic trudge about a dying father trying to keep his young son safe after a global ecosystem collapse that has killed off all plant and animal life. Even more than usual with these incursions into sf by non-genre writers, it's anxious not to activate the science-fictional way of thinking that rejects the insurmountable and sees all problems, however terminal, as technical challenges susceptible to human resourcefulness; and as often, it has to resort to cheating, by refusing its readers the information necessary to formulate a solution. Thus in book as in film we're not told, though the characters know, what caused the catastrophe, and the symptoms are fairly incoherent – particularly the gratuitous tectonic instability that rumbles in the background and occasionally throws trees at our heroes. None of this is any more nonsensical than any more overtly science-fictional apocalypse movie; but it's harder to indulge the father's unconcern with the transmission of experience from his dying generation to the child who never knew the old world. The film respects McCarthy's indifference to the comforts of survivalist narrative, though it's discreetly worked up a clearer moral nucleus in the boy's faith in a possibility of human decency that his father can no longer sustain. But while it all makes for an evocative enough vision of an apocalypse beyond the usual seductions and comforts of sf narrative, it's a rather watered-down version of the book: the boy is too old and too wise, both leads are much too well fed, the cannibal horrors have been tastefully pruned, the bold dream sequences domesticated into flashback screentime for Charlize Theron and the mechanism of her death elided, and McCarthy's striking narratorial prose (in which even the apostrophe is sliding into extinction) edited into straight-ahead voiceover by the star. It's a sensitive, at times iconic visual companion to a brave attempt to imagine the unthinkable; but the text has an emotional and narrative pull that can only be attenuated by a bare staging of its event-line.



McCarthy's novel clearly had some undeclared influence on Gary Whitta's 2006 spec script for **The Book of Eli**, a similar scenario given a more conventionally Joel Silver treatment with firearms, ammunition, and petroleum as mysteriously available as in the golden days of *Mad Max*, in a future so bright that everyone wears shades and only the coarsest of muggers survive (Ray Stevenson, John C. Reilly, and not just Gary Oldman but Gary Oldman *with a limp*). Though the hero's choice of name has primarily scriptural significance, Eli is also the name of Robert Duvall's character in *The Road*, with whom the Hughes brothers' hero shares something else of moment; and both films are threaded around a minimally-motivated anabasis to the ocean, on a road beset by cannibals and gangs. It's difficult to say much more, since *Eli* is one of those films constructed entirely around a twist that more percipient viewers than I, and all connoisseurs of samurai cinema, will see coming like an asteroid strike, allowing them an additional two hours to clutch knees to chest and rock back and forth moaning "No...no...no..." But for those spared such foreknowledge (and there's a clue elsewhere in this column if you're desperate), it seems for most of its length merely to be a preposterous post-apocalypse western about a God-driven Denzel Washington crossing a wasted America from east coast to west with the last known copy of the King James Bible, and local thuglord Oldman's attempts to obtain it as an engine of mind control and power. The most arresting element is a completely in-your-face religiosity that repeatedly shaves away alternatives to the explanation that Washington's character is an instrument of Yahweh, Who not only appoints him His prophet and sends him on a 30-year (!) trudge from coast to coast, but has a particular interest in protecting His vessel from machine-weapon bombardment and the go-on-give-me-one emo stylings of a nymphettic Mila Kunis. But it's clear, particularly from the way the Jennifer Beals plotline runs into the sand, that the ending has been rewritten to the point where everyone's past caring.



The Spierig brothers' **Daybreakers** is pretty much the same film as all of the above, here inhabiting the body of a busy conspiracy thriller in a post-pandemic world a decade from now in which everyone is a vampire and the dwindling population of humans are farmed for blood, a resource now running critically low and turning the starving vampire citizenry into undead crazy bat-people who have to be holocausted by the authorities to protect public order. Meanwhile, bleeding-

heart blood scientist Ethan Hawke finds himself torn between blood magnate Sam Neill's search for a synthetic substitute that won't make people's heads messily explode, and a human-led rebel movement that claims the vampirised can be turned back but someone (hmm, who could that be?) doesn't want it known. It's been quite hard work to make this seem less daft than it sounds, with expository text crowding the early frames in the form of headlines, labels, billboards, and TV captions; and

at times the Spierigs' meticulous world-building is a bit overindulged in the background newscasts ("Ten years after the outbreak, vampiric wildlife wandering into the daylight has become the number one cause of forest fires"). But in a world where all movies threaten to turn into vampire movies, this one at least has the idea that the vampire myth, and thus film in general, can be about the politics of consumer capitalism and environment rather than just about teenage sex.



There's another virus-ravaged near future, though this time kept affordably offscreen, in teeny-budgeted British chamber drama **Exam**, which announces itself rather

poncily as "A Stuart Hazeldine View" with a Union Jack presumptuously dominating the tiro writer-director's company logo. But the concept has legs: eight finalists for a key job with an enigmatic research company are confined in a room with eighty minutes to answer a question that can't be read on their seemingly blank papers. "Is this the ultimate mindfuck or what?" asks a character hopefully, inadvertently framing the film's real question; I never entirely got what the actual exam question turned out to be, but the answer to both is No. It's lining up a lot of hostages to stake a whole film on a single set, eight

deliberately anonymous and dimensionless characters identified only by stereotyping codenames, and a puzzle plot against a real-time clock in which the audience have all the information that the characters do and are considerably quicker thinking – particularly as, once the clock runs out and the hoped-for ending hoves into sight, there turns out to be another twenty minutes to sit through. Script and performances are painful, the plotting and the invocation of sf tropes are hopelessly incoherent, and the whole thing views like a particularly grim piece of fringe theatre of the kind you rather hoped had gone extinct.



Extinction probably beckons for the latest doomed-looking attempt at a Next Harry Potter franchise-booter in **Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief**, from the first volume of Rick Riordan's monster-bashing quintet about a training camp for fledgling American demigods. Riordan devised the series as a way to present a positive image of, and a narrative optimised for, kids affected by ADHD, dyslexia, and parental abandonment (these being Riordan's DSM-V symptom cluster for undiagnosed half-blood Greek godhead); and Chris Columbus's film proudly exhibits all three in its treatment of its source, with an Olympian disdain for the series' fans that manifests in a variety of disconcerting ways. The plot has been stripped down and rebuilt *Golden Compass*-style, with selected episodes freely resequenced in a half-blood storyline that seems to have been designed primarily for ease of game spin-off, and which dispenses with the original villain and motive, the crucial Hesiodic series arc, and most of the original reasons why the things that happen happen. All the key gods have been completely reconceived and the young heroes demographed up from twelve to sixteen-plus, so that Percy is now a high-school Zacalike and second lead Annabeth a hormone-teasing hottie (played by a 23-year-old), and the novel's ingenuity-taxing quest of crossing the US coast-to-coast on public transport has given way to a self-drive teen road movie. A few amusing ideas survive, and the ADHD-friendly plot is careful to cough up the books' obligatory dose of digital Harryhausen every chapter. But narking off the fanbase is a dangerous game to play if you really aspire to be the new *Twilight*. The Greeks had a word for that.



Joe Johnston's remake of **The Wolfman** is a classical monster movie with a different configuration of love-hate relationship with its divine parent, being in all respects but one a painfully respectful, if splatter-happy, homage to the 1941 version with a little bit of backstory mythos from *Werewolf of London* worked neatly in, and even Rick Baker reprising special makeup and transformation duties from *American Werewolf in London*. The original setting is acknowledged by letting Anthony Hopkins (as a very full-blooded Sir John Talbot) get increasingly Welsh as the film progresses and the pressure rises – a development undercut only by the fact that his family seat and all the other characters have been relocated to somewhere in Yorkshire. The silver-topped cane is still in there, but now a swordstick; and Curt Siodmak's famous “when the wolfsbane blooms” doggerel stanza makes the prologue, with the hesitation over whether it should be wolfsbane or wolfsbane sorted by having the text on screen say one while the uncredited voiceover (possibly Geraldine Chaplin's creepy Romany sibyl) reads the other. Producer-star Benicio del Toro is a notorious fanboy and has kept a tight leash on the production (which lost original writer Andrew Kevin Walker and director Mark Romanek to creative differences along the way), but with the consequence that it's ended up literally an actor's film in which Beno's Lawrence is no longer a scientist but a celebrity thespian; and this has played its baleful part in determining the solution to the mystery of the identity of the original werewolf who turns Beno in the first place. Will it turn out to be the hapless gypsy expendable from the Siodmak version? Sir Tony, our hero's tyrannical and unloving paterfamilias? secret-haunted Sikh manservant Art Malik? bereaved fiancée Emily Blunt, so demurely hot as she models a range of frilly black mourning dresses you just want to rip right off her? Which one of these would be quite a cool solution, and which would drain you of the last drop of will to live? Can you possibly guess which one the film has plumped for? Otherwise, the film does its best with a quieter pace of horror in which a month goes by between things happening – something *Jennifer's Body* fell foul of when they had to cut together a finale from events written and shot as taking place in different menstrual cycles. As they say in Na'vi, *pxasik*.



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